Pairing: Spike/Xander
Rating: R, only for swearing at the moment
Spoilers/Warnings/AN: Assumes a vague knowledge of Buffy S5-7 and Angel S5. Begins at the end of Season 5. I claim artistic licence with canon, including the ATS finale and the comics, both of which I’m pretty sure I’ll ignore eventually, but hey, its fanfic, we can do that.

Bearing in mind that I am completely spoiler-free writer-person, this is just a heads up for those who are picky about their Spander and like a nice smooth run to a happy ending. This fic may not be going exactly where you're expecting, or rather it will be taking a circuitous route to get there

Disclaimer: Not mine, all Joss’s.
Feedback: Is motivation.
Summary: Looking back, Spike had never worked out just how he and Harris got to where they did that summer; he couldn’t quite work out exactly where that was either.
Beta thanks to @laazikaat

DISCLAIMER... None of the characters are mine. Shocking, I know. Also not making any money... and the surprises just keep coming. Joss Whedon (bless his little cotton socks) & Co own EVERYBLOODYTHING. I'mnotworthy I'mnotworthy. No breaches of any illegal breachable thing are intended. It's all done out of love, obsession, hero worship and horniness.
Four Seasons

by
Kimalis

Part One

Once the days had began to shorten, the trees around the cemetery started to turn, and the cool damp again seeped into his crypt, Spike realised the past summer, the one that should have only been about the death of Buffy, had become the summer that was all about Xander bloody Harris. He’d never worked out just how they got to where they did; never quite worked out exactly where that was either.

Sometimes, he looked for reasons for it. Could he put it all down to the confusion of the slayer’s death? Her sacrifice had left them all shell shocked. The Bit walked around in a daze for weeks after, so did the witches. The watcher, now he kept it together. He reinforced that stiff upper lip, and if ever it buckled, it was out of sight of those Scoobies.
Spike had fancied he loved her, and maybe he did, maybe he didn’t, but her death hit him hard either way. It only took a couple of weeks for Spike to realise that while he did miss the slayer, and her death was a massive blow, it also relieved him of a huge weight. Being in love with a slayer was not a simple concept. He’d long resisted comparing himself to Angel, but in the end, that’s exactly what Spike did.

Both hard-nosed vampires, mooning around after the slayer, knowing that as far as bad ideas went, it was right up there. A match made in hell. That could not have been made any clearer by the disaster that was the Buffy and Angel show. Enemies by definition, so how could it ever be more? There could be a truce, there could be an exchange of promises and wishes but it wouldn’t last. It just couldn’t. His body may not age, but Spike was still old. Neither man nor demon could get to his age and not be able to see reason on the odd occasion. For both him and Angel, Buffy was a pipe dream, she’d never been anything else.

Spike knew he could easily blame everything that had happened solely on Buffy’s death, but he guessed he’d be lying to himself, and anyone else who cared to listen. If he blamed the circumstances, then that would be as good as saying Harris had nothing worthwhile of his own
to bring to the table. Spike knew now that Xander did; he’d been more than just a link to a dead infatuation. More than a way to deal with the loss and pass the time. Much more.

He might not know where they ended, but he knew the path they’d taken and the exact time and place they’d begun.

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It had been just four days and nineteen hours after. Spike had walked into a bar, looking for somewhere to lose himself in a deep bottle. It wasn’t the Bronze, it wasn’t Willy’s; just a nondescript, out of the way place. He’d noticed the boy sitting in the back corner with a beer and a plate of food, watching the door, the raw pain on his face quickly covered when he’d recognised Spike.

Spike had debated walking out again, there was no love lost between him and the donut boy. Instead, he’d bought a drink and joined Harris; there’d been no point pretending they hadn’t seen each other and that they weren’t there for the very same reason. That first night, neither had spoken until Spike had bitten the bullet.

“Pool?”

“Sure.”
Then after the game, “Patrol?”

“Yeah.”

Four words between them in as many hours. But that was just the first night, things had lightened up considerably since then. It was a mutual understanding. Tuesdays and Fridays, they met, they talked, they had a few drinks or played pool, then they never spoke of it again.

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This Tuesday, in the fourth week after, was the same as most other nights. Spike steered himself towards the bar. It was the ideal venue. No chance that they would bump into any Scoobies, an unlikely locale for demons too. It was peaceful, it was a haven. They could drink, talk, play pool or just sit and cope. Spike knew that was what Xander was trying to do. Just cope.

Tonight, the boy was sitting at the back corner table facing the room. It was the same each time they’d met, and Spike knew why. Quick exit if necessary, clear view of the room, so no surprises. They’d all had enough surprises for now. Spike often wondered what Xander would do if that table was taken.
Xander had already bought a plate of wings, and, judging by the peanut shells on the floor, he’d been there a while. Spike stopped at the bar, bought a beer for himself, and after checking the table and seeing Xander with an empty beer glass, he paid for a coke then headed for the back. It was their unspoken rule, just another habit they had fallen into. He who got there first bought the food, the other would buy the drinks. Two beers. Next round would be beer and a coke. If they were still there for a third, then whiskey and a coke. To date, there hadn’t been a fourth.

Spike slid the glass across the table, didn’t expect or receive any thanks, just a glance of acknowledgement. Thanks were for friends and polite company. Spike knew that they were neither, despite the fact that he didn’t mind Harris’s company as much as he’d thought he would.

“Patrolling tonight?” Xander asked. Safe ground. Common ground. His eyes were fixed on his drink.


“You taking the Buffybot?”
Fucking thing, he wished he’d never seen it. Most times, he tried to ignore it. He knew Harris did too. It was just too close. Too well made. “No. It can look after itself. Maybe the witches can go with it.”

“Yeah, maybe. Okay then. Restfield.”

Boy was still talking to his glass. Spike picked at the nearly cold wings. “Demon bint working?”

“When isn’t she?” Xander snorted. “Easier to deal with money and business, than with those pesky grieving humans and their irrational emotions.”

Spike twitched an eyebrow. This was new. Usually his standard reference to Anya was met with a harsh reminder that she had a real name and he’d better damn well learn to use it. This was the first time Harris had spoken about his woman.

“Problems?”

Xander finally took his eyes off his glass and considered Spike warily. “Many,” he sighed, and went back to his drink.

And that was it. Spike had learned not to push. While Xander was content to listen any old time, he would only talk when he was good and ready. If he wanted more of a
conversation, then he would sit back in the chair and casually cross his legs, much more open body language, but still with a hint of defensiveness. This boy, only just emerging from mourning, was a pale imitation of the former Xander Harris.

Now, he was in his ‘one word answers only’ position, hunched over the table. He stared into the bottom of his coke and fiddled with the glass, as if it held all the answers. Spike knew you couldn’t find any of them there, no matter what your poison. Usually the contents of his glass or bottle numbed him just enough, that he forgot the question. For a short time.

“Axe or stake tonight?” Spike asked.

He answered with a harsh little smile. “Stake.”

Good, Spike thought. Meant he was working out some issues. Axe meant he was getting the job done. One swing, heads off, pile of dust, move on. Stakes meant hand to hand. Fighting, taking risks. Stakes meant Harris was pissed off. It would be a good night out.

Spike also carried a stake in his coat, but it would be a last resort. Tonight would be cathartic- rough, violent, all bare hands; the stake was just back-up. It was how he dealt with things. How he moved on and fought the
instability within himself. He needed the aggression, the raw brutality, it settled his demon. Too long now he’d been in turmoil.

First, the demon had been baffled and disturbed by the onslaught of feelings for the slayer, then there was the complete loss of equilibrium, when the demon inside crowed and rejoiced at her death, while what was left of the man grieved. Back to the simple nature of the vampire, to restore himself. Kill.

Spike withdrew the stake from his pocket and twisted it between his fingers. He felt Harris’s eyes following it.

“She was bloody good with a stake,” Spike said softly. “Nearly had me a time or two.”

Xander’s brow furrowed and his eyes closed for just a moment. “Yeah, she was.” His hand dropped off the side of his glass and lay on the table.

Spike shook off the descending melancholy. “Wonder if the Bit can be as good? We should train her up right soon.”

Xander’s hand fell into his lap and he leaned back in the seat and met Spike’s eyes briefly. “We should. She needs to know. Now that we’ve lost-. Now that Dawn has to look after herself.”
“She doesn’t though, does she? She’s got more soddin’ white hats looking out for her than anyone I’ve known.”

“Still.”

“True. Town like this, a girl needs to have some skills.”

“Doesn’t always help though, does it?”

“Not much would against a bleedin’ hell god.”

“No. I suppose not.” Xander crossed his legs, and despite his calm façade, one foot jiggled furiously.

Boy was getting twitchy talking about the slayer. Time to go. Spike drained his drink and pointed to the wings. “You going to finish those?”

Xander curled his lip and pushed the plate towards Spike. “All yours.”

“Not tonight. Patrol?”

It was either a sigh of relief or one of resignation, but whichever it was, Xander stood and followed Spike out the door.

It was a short drive to the Restfield cemetery, they didn’t speak, nor did Xander acknowledge Spike’s presence other than to say ‘buckle up’.
Patrol was standard. Efficient. No conversation, only shouted warnings and instructions. Spike had been right. Harris was working out an issue or two, perhaps more, if the way he was fighting was any indicator. He toyed when he could, staked outright when he couldn’t. He took a few hits himself but climbed back to his feet and gave as good as he got. Spike well knew how a good arse kicking could spur a man on to do his best.

Generally Spike had left him to it. Who was he to intervene if the boy wanted to go up against the local evil? Just last week though, they’d begun teaming up. It was unconscious, unplanned, but it worked. They fought back to back, side by side and Xander picked up a new technique here and there. If Spike thought about it, which he tried not to, it was a way for him to unobtrusively preserve the boy’s life. Not that he should care about either his life or his sensibilities. They weren’t friends.

It was late, pickings were growing slim and it was that time, where they headed back to the car and went their separate ways. Always Xander had driven Spike to the destination; never had he offered a ride back again. Spike didn’t mind, he usually found something to kill on the way home or to the bar, or wherever he was going to spend the rest of the night.
Tonight, Xander walked to his car and Spike turned to go, all seemed normal.

“You need a ride somewhere?” Xander asked, his hand hesitating on the door.

Spike stopped, surprised at the second departure from routine that evening. He was happy to walk, but happier to not. He got in.

“Going to your crypt?”

Spike put his seat belt on before Xander reminded him. “No, a pub, don’t care where, just let me out when you pass one.”

As they drove, Spike snuck the odd glance, under the guise of looking out the other window. Definitely more relaxed, he could see that the boy’s deep, bone aching sadness was beginning to lift. That pain that had taken his spark, the boundless energy that Spike and the watcher alike had cursed time and again, was easing.

Xander drove through the centre of Sunnydale, and stopped outside a bar. A low hum of music and voices carried out to the street. He looked at Spike questioningly. Spike just shrugged and got out. As he shut the door, Spike could have sworn he heard ‘goodnight’, but that wouldn’t be right. It was another of
those things that only friends said, like ‘hi’ or ‘hello’ or ‘how are you’.

Spike watched the car drive away. He pulled his duster around him and went inside. Didn’t matter that this wasn’t his usual haunt; sorrows were sorrows no matter where you were, he could drown them just as easily here.

Part Two

Friday night, Spike was already there when Xander arrived. He noted the quick glance at the table before the boy went to the bar and bought two drinks. Routine, so far. Spike had the wings and the nuts.

Xander sat in his favoured chair, with the full view of the room and passed Spike a beer.

“Prost,” he said, tipping his glass the smallest amount towards Spike.
Spike stared. Was that almost a smile on Harris’s face? Couldn’t be, must have been the bad lighting; he hadn’t smiled for weeks. “Cheers,” he answered, then downed half his beer.

They sat and ate and drank.

“You were at her house today.” Xander sat back in his chair and crossed his legs.

Time to talk. “Just checking up on the Niblet. I made a promise to a lady.”

“You left your blanket. It’s in my car.”

“Right.”

Xander chewed thoughtfully on a wing. “You keep your promises then? Even though she is-, was, the slayer.”

“I keep my promises, don’t matter who I make ‘em to. Not gonna leave the Bit hanging.”

“I know that would mean a lot to Bu-. Well, that means a lot. Thanks.”
Thanks? Spike’s eyes narrowed, and he considered pulling Harris up on his slip, but Xander was again hunched over his drink.

Another round and they were done, and Xander drove to that night’s patrol zone. This time, it was a large park, with numerous picnic areas and playgrounds. A favoured haunt of fledges who’d been turned as teens. Again, Xander wielded stakes. Spike had to think quickly a few times to ensure the Scoobies didn’t have another funeral to deal with, but generally, he was impressed with how the boy held his own.

Almost midnight, in the parking lot and Xander was waving Spike into the car again.

“You want me to let you out at a bar?” Xander asked, as they drove into the center of Sunnydale.

“Nah, not tonight. Just going to my crypt. Got some movies from Blockbuster.”

“Didn’t know you had a membership card.”

Spike smirked. “I don’t.” Why bother, when a goodly number fit nicely into his duster. It was only a few days
ago that he’d ignored the security alarm, flashed his
demon face at the panicked staff and walked out of the
store with full pockets, a new DVD player on his
shoulder, and some packages of microwave popcorn in
his hand.

“Of course not. So, what are you watching?”

Spike was struggling to keep to the topic. Conversations
in the car didn’t happen. It was too confined. Too
personal. Friends chatted in cars, they didn’t. He itched
to ask ‘why now?’, but knew better than to do that.

“Slasher films.”

Xander’s head moved minutely, and Spike absolutely saw
the hint of a smile this time. “No surprise.”

“Yeah, well, evil here.”

Xander gave him an appraising look. “Sure you are; we’ll
just ignore your thing for Passions. But, you know, you
don’t have to be evil to appreciate that kind of movie.”

Was that a hint? “That you don’t.”
The car stopped at the gates of Spike’s cemetery, and he almost asked Harris in to watch with him. But they weren’t friends, so instead, he nodded and got out.

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A group patrol had been organised the next week, after Spike discovered a large nest of vampires. All hands on deck, except Dawn, who stayed home with Anya. Spike noticed that the demon bint and Harris didn’t speak when those plans were quickly made, he just handed her the car keys and made arrangements to get a ride with Willow and Tara.

They were travelling to a cemetery again, Xander and Spike in the back of Tara’s car; Giles and the bot in his.

Small car, European compact, close quarters, and Spike couldn’t get any nearer to his door if he tried. He thought there would be more space in the back than there apparently was. Maybe Harris just took up a lot of room. They bumped knees and bumped elbows, around corners and over dips. Spike wondered why he hadn’t just run there. Would probably have been faster than the blonde witch’s driving.
Between them, Spike, Xander, Giles and the bot, with some magical assistance from Willow and Tara, managed to clear the nest with no injuries to themselves. But Spike was still hyped. It had been a big nest, but with so many fighting alongside him, it had only been an appetiser. There were two more cemeteries and a park between this one and home, no doubt he would find something to help burn off his excess energy on the way.

“I believe we are finished for this evening. Well done everybody,” Giles said, patting dust from his shoulders. “I’ll be off. I am quite sure I can hear a nice brandy calling.”

“Okay, Giles,” Willow said. “Come on Xan, you can grab a ride back to our place, and go home with Anya from there. But I already called shotgun.”

Everyone seemed organised and would get home in one piece, so Spike turned to leave. As he did, he caught Xander’s expression. Harris was debating. He had that look that Spike knew he sometimes got, when he was weighing up how much shit he would get, for the decision he was about to make. Spike flinched a little, when he realised he now knew Harris well enough to
recognise that.

“Nah, thanks, Will. I think I’m just gonna head out for a beer and unwind first. There’s a bar not too far away, I’ll be fine.”

Spike sighed. Everyone was not organised and Harris would not get home in one piece if he went wandering off on his own. But why should Spike be the one to escort him? What did he care if one of those bloody irritating, sanctimonious humans didn’t make it home? What kind of demon went about changing his plans to chaperone a soddin’ white hat? Spike lit his cigarette and took a few steps out of the parking lot.

Willow frowned. “Are you sure? Xander, you shouldn’t be walking around by yourself at night. Anya will worry.”

Going by what he’d picked up the last few weeks, Spike knew the bint wouldn’t worry, but didn’t think Harris was up to explaining all that. Probably it would raise more questions than he was willing to deal with.

“Xander, really,” Giles said. “Do think of your safety. How would Dawn react if something were to happen to you?”
Spike stopped and shook his head. Fucking watcher. He turned back to the small group. “You can all stop your bloody fretting, he’ll be fine. I’ve got to go that way myself.” Xander was looking at him with a mixture of surprise and relief.

“Oh!” Willow brightened. “Um, Xan, will you be alright then?”

“Yeah. I’ll get a cab home later.” He waved goodbye, watched the others drive away, then headed for the road. Spike fell in beside him.

They walked in silence for a while, Spike smoking, Xander thinking.

“So, where are you really going?” Xander finally asked.

Spike shrugged and gave a theatrical sigh. “One advantage of being me, can go where I bloody well please, do what I want.”

“Doesn’t that get boring?”

Spike thought. “Fuck, yes.”
“You have responsibilities, you know.”

“Do I now?”

“Dawn. You made a promise to-. You made a promise.” Xander glanced sideways at him.

“Yeah, I know that. Not gonna forget Niblet.” Spike flicked his cigarette away. “Protecting her is not really what I’d call a responsibility though. I’d say responsibilities are those things you have to do, but hate; the rest is just life, yeah?”

“Yeah. Do you have any of those? The other kind?”

Spike thought for a moment, then rolled his eyes. “Yeah. Protecting the rest of you.”

“You hate that?”

“What? Looking out for the humans who would soddin’ stake me as soon as look at me? The ones who give me stale pig’s blood and think I should be grateful? Who expect me to be at their beck and call every bloody hour of the day and night? Yeah, I hate it. But more than that, I hate that I want to do it.”
“The blood is stale?”

“More often than not.”

“You hate us?”

“Not all of you.”

“So, why do you stay?”

Spike stared at him and thought about that, answering honestly. “I don’t know.”

“Hmm.” Xander stopped, looked around and pointed to the bar across the street. “Beer? Pool?”


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That Friday night, in the fifth week after, they met as usual, but Spike noticed things were changing even more. He wondered if Harris even realised.
“Hey. Thanks,” Xander said, when Spike sat and pushed the beer across the table.

Spike frowned as Xander picked it up and leaned back in his seat, crossing his legs. He watched the boy with interest. He looked lighter. Less tense. More open.

“Good day?” Spike asked.

Xander seemed to weigh something up, then nodded slowly. “In a way, yeah.”

Spike just waited while Xander drained half his glass.

“Anya left.”

Spike nodded. Not entirely unexpected. “Left for where?”

“D’Hoffryn. Less emotional baggage for demons apparently.”

“I wouldn’t say that. Mind you, I’m not a bloody vengeance demon.”

“Well, as of-,” Xander looked at his watch. “Ten and half
hours ago, she is.”

“Right then. You don’t seem to be concerned about curses, or a woman scorned and all that. You don’t think she’s going to go for your goolies, with some settling of scores or what not?”

“No. I didn’t do anything to her. She just didn’t know how to cope with Buffy’s-,” he paused for a moment, then sighed, obviously relieved at finally saying the words. “-with Buffy’s death. I think the idea of mortality was too much for her.”

“I get that.”

“Do you?”

Spike frowned. “Course I do. I’m bloody immortal aren’t I? I’d seriously consider topping myself if I ever became human. Who’d want to wait around to get old, ugly and senile?”

“Yeah I guess black leather and bleached hair would look pretty stupid next to a bag of incontinence pads and a bowl of prunes.”
“That’s my point. This way I stay young and pretty forever, yeah?”

Xander slowly lowered his drink to the table. “Like Buffy,” he said with a tiny, sad smile.

Spike nodded and held out his glass to Xander. They clinked and drank and lost themselves in private thoughts.

Later Xander drove them to patrol, and again, there was conversation in the car. Spike didn’t question it; the changes were coming thick and fast now. When they arrived at the cemetery, Xander took an axe from the car. The work was done quickly. They stuck together, and with Xander now picking up more tips each time they fought, he became much more efficient.

This time, there was no question of Spike walking back. Xander merely took Spike’s weapon out of his hands and tossed it in the trunk alongside his own. On the way back into town they debriefed; Xander asked for pointers and Spike offered tips on how to improve his style.

When they pulled up to Spike’s gates, they were still mid conversation. Xander got out with Spike to open the
trunk, and Spike spent another few minutes, demonstrating with the weapons.

As Xander went to get back into the car, and raised a hand in a half-wave, Spike recalled the might-have-been hint that Xander had dropped the week before, and, for just a brief moment, entertained the thought of asking him in for a drink. Just for a moment, though, then the thought was gone.

With a curt nod in response to Xander’s wave, Spike headed off through the gates and went home alone.

Part Three

At the Magic Box the next week, Willow was tip toeing around Xander, fetching him endless sodas, and what Spike supposed could loosely be described as food; plastic-wrapped and cream-filled though it may be.

Spike was sitting on the stairs, sipping at a mug of blood.
This one was fresher than the others, but watered down somewhat. Maybe he could find something on his way home later. There had to be an edible demon around somewhere, it was the bloody Hellmouth after all. It would do him no end of good. He and his demon were both in sore need of a long, vicious fight.

Spike could see Xander’s frustration building, as the witch tried just a little too hard to cheer him up.

“Willow, I’m fine, really,” Xander said for the tenth time. “Please stop making a fuss. I’m okay with Anya leaving, I promise.”

“But Xan, it’s just so soon after, after-. Well, it’s too soon, she shouldn’t have gone.” Willow’s eyes filled with tears and Xander stood up and hugged her to him.

“It’s really okay, Willow, really,” Xander’s eyes met Spike’s briefly, as he patted her back. “It was coming for a while, she wasn’t happy being human. She tried, but what happened was just too much for her. It was just too close to home. I don’t blame her for going back to D’Hoffryn.”

“But Xander how can you be okay with her doing those
things? She’s a demon.”

“And she was a demon for a thousand years before she was human, it’s just how it is Willow. What am I gonna do? Kill her?”

“No!” Willow looked horrified.

“I guess we just have to hope that having been human for a couple of years, she’ll use a bit of that compassion when she deals with her, um, clients. Maybe D’Hoffryn will go easy on her for a while.” Xander glanced at Spike questioningly.

He knew Xander was looking for confirmation, but he wasn’t about to lie. Spike shook his head slightly and was a little disappointed with himself, when he saw the resignation in Xander’s face. Spike finished his blood, cringing at the taste.

Willow wiped at her eyes and sat down next to Tara, taking her hand. “You think so Xan? I’d hate to think she would just jump right back in with the maiming and cursing.”

“Sure she wouldn’t, Sweetie,” Tara said. “Right, Xander?”
“No doubt.” Xander’s voice held little conviction, but he smiled anyway. “Now you all need to stop worrying about me, I’m good. Okay? And I’m full of sugar, which normally wouldn’t be an issue, but I must be getting old, because now I crave the salty goodness of peanuts, and the bitter nastiness of beer, to wash it all down.”

Willow frowned. “Xan, any other time, I would say peanut and beer craving equals Bronze, but I just don’t-.”

“It’s okay, Willow, I don’t feel real Bronzy tonight. I don’t think we’re ready for that yet.”

“Oh, oh good. It’s just that without her here, it doesn’t feel right. I know it’s been nearly six weeks, but, well, you know.” Willow finished with a pleading look at Xander.

He leaned over and kissed her forehead. “I know, Will. One day, huh?”

Willow and Tara collected Dawn from the training room where she’d been researching with some of Giles’ volumes. Spike had noticed her favouring that room, not long after Buffy died. When he’d ventured a question about it, she’d revealed it was the one place she felt
close to Buffy. The smell of the weapons and the leather punching bag and mitts were comforting, more so than the scent of books and herbs in the store proper.

After the girls had gone, and Giles began locking up, Xander and Spike left the store. Out on the sidewalk, Xander jingled his car keys. “That is the sound of cold ale and salted nuts. You in?”

Not their regular night, but who was he to refuse? “Bloody hell, yes.”

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Xander drove and Spike stared out the window, watching the shop fronts go by. He always felt a little down after spending time with the Bit. She tried to be cheerful, but he knew it was only pretence. He’d have to talk to her about that. No need to be brave when you felt like crumbling. Not when there were so many willing to pick up the pieces.

An unexpected right turn caught Spike’s attention, and he glanced over at Xander. “New bar?”
“No. You got any cash?”

“Some, why? You want me to spot you a few quid?”

“No. I’m fine. You’ll need it though.”

Xander pulled the car over behind a small brick building. “Let’s go.”

Spike raised an eyebrow at him, but when nothing further was forthcoming, he got out and followed Xander to the back door. There was a small bell near the door; Xander pressed it and they waited.

“You plan on telling me why we’re here?” Spike asked.

The door opened and a young guy in jeans and a white coat was silhouetted by the light inside. “You Roy’s friend?”

“Yeah,” Xander answered. “Can you help us out?”

“Only got two tonight, come back again in a couple of days. Ask for me, TJ. I might have some more.” He handed over a heavy paper bag to Xander, who turned to Spike with his hand out.
“Cash up.”

“What am I paying for here?”

Xander handed him the bag and Spike looked inside. Blood bags. He tilted it towards the light and caught the labels. Human blood. Time and date stamped that morning.

“Right then, cash it is.” Spike dug in his pocket and held out a wad of bills. TJ peeled a few off the top and stuffed them in his wallet.

“Like I said, couple of days, there’ll be more.”

“Thanks,” Xander said. “One of us will be by; most likely him”

TJ nodded and disappeared back inside. They heard the door lock behind him.

Spike turned to Xander. “And what the hell is this about?” he demanded.

“You said your blood was stale. Roy at work has a brother
who’s a pathologist.” Xander pointed at the bag in Spike’s hand. “That’s the rejects from blood donors. It’s not a reliable source, but it might get you a few bags a week. They’d only be trashed otherwise.”

“Looking out for me now, are you?” Spike asked, a scowl beginning on his forehead.

Xander unlocked the car and they got in. As they drove off, he shook his head. “I didn’t do this for you. It’s for Dawn.”

“Right, fair enough. But you know, I think she prefers O pos. This here is A.”

“If you aren’t getting enough blood, you’re not going to be at the top of your game. If you aren’t fighting fit, then how do you protect her?”

“Point taken. It’s all about the Niblet.”

“Yeah.”
Later, back at their regular bar, Xander decided to forgo the wings, but took the nuts, while Spike bought the drinks. Their usual table was already taken, and Spike noticed a moment’s hesitation on Xander’s part as he glanced back at the door, before he found another table that provided a similar view of the establishment.

Spike took note, as Xander immediately leaned back in his seat, tossed down a handful of nuts, and scanned the room. Much more relaxed, even after the witch’s half arsed attempt at consolation. Spike wondered if he would be able to broach the subject of why.

Xander’s eyes made a quick circuit of the room before ending on his beer. He took a healthy swallow and then fixed his gaze on Spike. “So, she’s not just going to ease her way back into it? Anya I mean?”

“Doubt he would let her. She’s a soddin’ vengeance demon, they have a job to do.”

“Hmm.” Xander nodded thoughtfully. “And he wouldn’t give her any consideration for being human?”

Spike laughed harshly. “Hell no. He would want her
straight back into it. In fact, he would be expecting a little something special from her, to prove there was no humanity left.”

“She told me she wouldn’t be around. She’d go back to Europe and work over there.”

“Smart move. Get away from the Hellmouth, away from you lot who tend to do away with her kind, more often than not.”

Xander nodded again and toyed with his glass. “I feel better now, you know? Now she’s gone. It’s just made-,” Xander waved his hand around, searching for the word. “Well, everything, so much easier.”

“I can see that.”

“Can you? You’ve been looking?”

Spike sneered. “Harris, I’m not watching your every move, not hanging on your every word, you just aren’t that interesting.”

“Still, you noticed.”
“Course I noticed. We’ve shared a table here for the last five weeks, I’m not stupid. And whatever you were about to say to that, forget it, or you can find yourself a new drinking partner. Maybe the watcher’ll take you out for a snifter or two and a cigar at the gentlemen’s club.”

Xander laughed. Not a big laugh, it didn’t quite reach his eyes, in fact it was more of a snort, but still, it was an improvement on the last few weeks.

“I think that Giles would have blown a gasket, tying to deal with things in my company since she-, since Buffy died.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’d bite you in an instant, Harris. But your company hasn’t been the nightmare I thought it would.”

“Gee, thanks.” Xander gave him a sour look. “And I’d stake you as soon as look at you, if it weren’t for the fact that you’ve made certain promises and you occasionally buy my beer.”

“Well then, we understand each other. Not friends, never will be.”
“I’ll drink to that, not-friend.” Xander tipped his glass to Spike then drained it. “Second round on me,” he said getting up and heading for the bar.

Spike watched him go. The almost-cheerful façade had slipped as soon as Harris had gotten up. Spike had to wonder, how much of his talk about the demon bint had been bravado. It was a big hit for a young man to take, so soon after losing a best friend. Not your problem, Spike told himself. Harris was just someone to down a few pints with.

Not friends, never would be. And that suited him fine for now. Didn’t need to be friends with someone to keep their company and get through a bad time. And this was Harris. Awkward, clumsy, painfully human, bloody annoying. The last thing Spike wanted was to be playing with his food, regardless of the bloody chip. Still, it passed the time, in a not so unpleasant way.

Harris returned with the drinks and Spike noticed he’d changed his routine yet again. Second round was always beer and coke, but Xander had returned with two beers.

“Living dangerously?” Spike asked, indicating the beer glass.
“Another one can’t hurt, can it?” Xander asked. “Not like it’s spirits. And I’m not going home to anyone now.”

“As long as you don’t get weeping maudlin and vomit on my boots, Harris, I don’t care what you drink. Bottoms up,” Spike said and drained half his glass.

Xander eyed him. “Alcohol doesn’t make me emotional, so you’re safe.”

“And my boots?”

“Different story altogether. The people in the front row, will get wet.”

“You humans are bloody disgusting,” Spike said curling his lip.

“Says the corpse with blood on his breath,” Xander muttered into his glass.

“Just give me fair warning, yeah?”

Xander finished the beer and slammed the glass down on the table top. “Not to worry, you’ll know its coming.
When it gets to that stage, you’ll be pouring me home.”

“Sod it,” Spike said, and finished his second beer. “I’m buying the next round. Cherry coke or regular?”

Then Xander did laugh, accompanied by a tiny smile. It didn’t last long, and he seemed to catch himself and frown, before settling back into the serious, but not quite as troubled expression, of the last few weeks.

At the bar, Spike decided against another bowl of nuts, and instead, ordered a plate of wings. If the boy was going to drink more than usual, he should at least have something in his stomach, aside from those hideous cream-filled confections. Spike told himself it was all in his own interests. He didn’t want to have to deal with a messy, sick human.

There was a game or two of pool, then a quick lap of the cemetery, cut short by Spike, when Xander displayed even less than his usual mediocre fighting skills, the edge having been taken off by the subsequent rounds of beer that Harris insisted on buying.

Spike had snatched the keys and driven a protesting Xander back to his apartment. The boy wasn’t exactly
passing-out drunk, just not of sound mind and body. Spike played his regular part of put upon Scooby guardian, with a suitable amount of swearing and complaining as he steered Xander up the stairs. He waited while Harris fumbled his keys, and let himself inside. There were slurred and awkward thanks from behind the unseen barrier, before the door was closed and latched.

Spike took himself back out and let the demon off the leash.

**Part Four**

They met again on the Saturday in the sixth week after, and a more subdued Xander stuck to coke.

“Don’t ever let me drink that much again,” He mumbled, leaning his head back against the wall.

“Let _you_? I’m not your bloody mother,” Spike said, trying not to laugh at the miserable face. “And what the hell are you whining for now? That was days ago, you can’t still be hung over?”

“No, just a flashback.” Xander groaned. “God, it was only beer. How is it you can throw down glass after glass, and still walk a straight line?”
“You’re just not a drinker. Besides, I’m a vampire; it can make for a bloody expensive event, if I want to get myself shit faced.”

“You do that often?”

Spike just shrugged. “Yeah, but it doesn’t help much when I do. And there’s always tomorrow.”

“You gotta face up sooner or later, huh?”

“That you do,” Spike agreed, and sipped at the beer. “Getting on the piss only dulls the edge for a few hours. Whatever it was that drove you there in the first place, will still be there when you come out of it. Difference is, you have to deal with it through a stinkin’ hangover.”

Xander waved his hand at Spike’s beer. “Yet there’s this, and I’d guess more than one bottle of whiskey waiting for you at home.”

“Yeah, well, I’m speaking from experience. I’m not some paradigm of virtue, spouting pearls of wisdom.”

Xander sipped his soda, and was quiet for a while, thinking. Spike noticed he seemed to do that more these days. He was less of the impulsive clown, not the boy who was always looking for the laughs and trying to fill the gaps in conversation with inane chatter. Spike was
using the quiet moment, reflecting on the changes that Buffy’s death had brought about for so many people, when he realised Xander was speaking again.

“What does help, then? Like you said, you can drink, it blocks it out for a while, but then you sober up and hey, what do you know, problem still exists and you feel like crap. So, what else? You can’t pretend it didn’t happen, that’s just not possible. Talking about it is just too hard, it hurts. So what’s the fix? How do you deal?”

“You mean me personally? Cause I don’t have a quick fix. I wait. That’s about it isn’t it? You let your bloody mind do what it does. It’ll go on its own merry way and drag you along with it, kicking and screaming. It’ll pull you down and put the boot in while you’re there, then it’ll haul you back up again and make you think everything is finally okay. Then one little thing, just the smallest bloody thing, a sound, a smell and you’re right back there again, and it’s like no time has passed, you haven’t healed at all. It’s why I drink to excess sometimes; my mind fucks with me, I’m gonna fuck with it right back. Drown it out with alcohol for a time.”

Xander just stared at him with his mouth hanging open. “You know all that made either no sense at all, or perfect sense. I just don’t know which yet.”
Spike snorted into his beer. “Don’t look at me. I don’t know what the hell I was trying to say. I drank half a bottle of Jack before I got here.”

“Did it help?”

Spike smirked. “Didn’t hurt.”

“So you’ll just deal with life while you’re hungover?”

“It’ll pass.”

“What? Life or the hangover?”

“Both,” he snorted.

“Not much of an existence is it? Just waiting for it to be over.”

“It’s a blink of an eye, this thing,” Spike said, being completely honest, but still considering Xander’s current state. “It’s bad, it hurts, it’s a crying shame the Bit lost her big sis, but when you’ve had lifetimes, and, the fates willing, will have more, it’s a blink. It’s bad now, but it won’t always be. So, I’ll wait it out in the way that suits me. This suits me.”

“I can’t drink like that and I don’t want to, so how do I wait it out? I don’t have all that experience to work with; I don’t have hundreds of years ahead of me. This is more
than a blink for me. I just want to open my eyes and have it over.”

Spike found himself wishing he had answers, something to tell the boy that would take the edge off, give him a light at the end of the tunnel. “Nothing but time. Weather it. It’ll pass.”

“When? Every day I wake up, and it never happened. You know those few seconds after you wake up, and nothing’s ever wrong? Everything is perfect, then it comes crashing in on you. It’s dark and it’s heavy and it’s there. Every damn day.”

Spike thought about how things had been changing, the breaks from their routine, and the openness that now came more often. “But think about it,” he said. “It’s not as dark, not as heavy now, is it? It’s changing.”

Xander stared at hard Spike while he thought. Spike felt the dark eyes on him, and even though he knew that it wasn’t him under scrutiny, he still felt as though he were being examined. It wasn’t as uncomfortable as he would have thought.

“Yeah.” Xander shook himself. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s more just a part of how things are now.” He sighed. “Buffy’s gone, Anya’s gone. Everything’s so different.”
“That it is. But it’ll get easier.”

Xander nodded. “Yeah, I know, just takes too damn long.”

They sat quietly for a while, just watching the room, picking at the cold chicken, toying with peanut shells. Long, silent minutes later, Spike waved his empty glass at Xander and raised an eyebrow in question.

“Nah, I’m good,” Xander said. “I think I just need to patrol.”

“You can’t hear that can you?” Spike asked, cocking his head towards the door. “It’s pissing down outside.”

Xander looked blankly over Spike’s shoulder. “Huh?”

“Raining. That’s put paid to your patrol idea.”

“Oh.” Xander sank down in his seat.

“So?” Spike waved the glass again.

Xander shrugged. “Sure, why not?”

Spike headed over to the bar and heard Xander setting up a pool table. Interesting night. They must have spoken more words tonight than they had done in the last few weeks. Actual conversation too, not just talking at each
other or around a topic. Real back and forth, listening and responding. Very nearly like friends.

Spike carried the drinks back and they played a few rounds. There was very little conversation. It was as if Harris had used up his quota of words and almost-smiles. The boy attacked the game as though he were wielding a weapon. The balls cracked against each other and thumped off the felt. They slammed around the table and into pockets.

If you couldn’t take out your issues on the demons, then the pool table must be the next best thing. Spike watched the determined expression, as Xander methodically potted his balls. It wasn’t until he fluffed the last shot, that Xander’s focus slipped and he finally looked up at Spike, almost as though he were surprised to find he wasn’t alone.

“Did that help?” Spike asked.

“Didn’t hurt,” Xander threw back, with a grim smile.

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The next week, Spike sat on the stairs at the Magic Box, watching Xander and the witches bent over books, watching Giles working his accounts, listening carefully for any problems in the area immediately surrounding
the store. Generally on research nights, he stuck with his own routine. He enjoyed the quiet, he let the others get on with the task at hand, while he watched, observed, mulled things over. This was a normal Saturday night at the store, but Spike knew that even though little was different, nothing was the same. It was not like before.

Now, Dawn was clingy; sometimes she sat in the training room, but tonight, she was on the stairs, leaning against Spike’s legs, while she read. He was enjoying the solid warmth of her small body, and casually, he dropped a hand on her shoulder. When she tilted her head up at him, her face was lit with a smile. Spike marvelled at how much he must have changed in recent times, if he felt so protective this girl, who should be no more than an easy meal. There were rumblings from the demon within at this, but Spike forced it back and tuned it out. *She’s too quiet,* he thought. *Not so much life in her now.* His hand stroked over her hair, and she leaned into him just a little more.

Spike looked up, scanning and checking the room, as he did every few minutes, and noticed Harris staring at his hand on Dawn’s hair. It was a thoughtful expression, with a faint wondering smile that he caught on the boy’s face, and Spike’s hand paused for a moment. Harris looked up,
met his eyes, and his smile grew fractionally, before he returned to his book.

There’s another change since the slayer went, Spike thought. No smart arse quips about demon anatomy, or the stuffiness of the old tomes. The work got done, the plans got made, no more.

Movement across the room caught Spike’s eye and pulled him out of his reverie. The watcher was heading for the basement and Spike knew exactly why. The fucking Bot. He cursed himself now, as he did every day for that thing.

Giles looked pointedly at Spike as he passed. Spike suppressed a growl and turned his head away from the basement door. “Oi, Niblet, let’s go out the back, and you can help me clean some of those swords you aren’t allowed to touch.”

Dawn looked up, then immediately over to Giles. Her face fell when she saw him opening the basement door. “Okay,” she said in a small voice. She put her book aside and hurried out to the training room.

“Let me help you,” Willow said, and got up as Dawn rushed by her.
He caught Harris’s eye on the way past and there was the hint of a smile of gratitude. Twice in one night. Things were changing.

In the training room, he set Dawn to work polishing some of the older equipment. “Here you go, Bit. These need a good old polish,” he said, handing her some older short swords. “But they’re not even sharp enough to give you a scratch,” he added, as Willow was about to question his choice.

Spike kept an eye on Dawn, and an ear on the other room. He could hear the Bot talking to Giles and sorely wished he couldn’t. Spike put down the knives he was cleaning, and peeled off his coat. He took a swing at the punching bag, took several swings in fact, hoping that the sounds of his fists hitting the leather would drown out the unwelcome voice from the shop.

The jarring up his arms and in his wrists was a welcome distraction. He hit harder, faster, he kicked out and kept the steady rhythmic thumping going, until he heard the bell over the door and knew the thing was gone.

Just moments later, Giles opened the training room door. “Dawn, it’s getting late, I think it’s high time you were home. Xander will drive you and stay until Willow and Tara return.”
Dawn’s face broke into a smile. “Xander’s taking me home?”

“Yeah sweetie, he is,” Willow said, walking Dawn out to the shop front. “Tara and I have to refresh the wards around the Magic Box. It’s better if there’s no one inside and it’s going to take a while.”

Spike collected his coat and followed them out.

“What do you say to a nightcap Dawnie?” Xander said with a smile.

“Will the nightcap have extra cheese and pepperoni?” she asked hopefully.

“You betcha.”

“Okay I accept your offer, on one condition.”

“Free pizza and babysitting comes with conditions now? You are growing up.”

“You are so not babysitting me, I’m just letting you keep me company till they get back.”

“That’s right Dawnie, and I am honoured and privileged that you would allow me that honour and privilege. But what’s the condition? Ice cream? Chips?”
“Spike.”

Xander’s brow creased. “Spike?”

“Spike. I want Spike to come too, and we can have pizza and watch a movie, like a boy’s night. It’s always just us girls at home-.” Dawn stopped and stared wide eyed at Willow and Tara. “Oh! Not that I don’t love you guys, cause I totally do, you know, love you, you know that, right? Oh.”

“Dawnie it’s okay,” Willow said, obviously holding back a laugh. “We know what you mean.”

Xander looked at Spike apprehensively. “Um, it’s fine with me, how about you?”

Spike looked at the hopeful expression on Dawn’s face. Much as it would not be his evening of choice, he didn’t want to be responsible for taking the happy gleam from her eyes. “Fine, but no bloody garlic, yeah?”

“Yay,” she squeaked.

Spike recalled a time, not that long ago, when it would have been screeches and squeals. Hopefully, those days would return. Meantime, he would do what he could to keep her happy. And if that meant watching a flick and eating crap for a couple of hours, then he could do that.
Part Five

Dawn had chosen a surprisingly testosterone-laden movie, and, lazing back in the soft sofa cushions, Spike had to admit the evening had not been as bad as he’d imagined it might.

He’d eaten the token slice of pizza, laced his coke with a good slurp of Jack from his flask, and put his feet up to watch the action flick. It was long over, and now Dawn was stretched out on the sofa between him and Harris, asleep. Her head was on a cushion on Xander’s lap, her legs across Spike’s and she was snoring softly.

Xander was running a hand absently over her hair, while Spike had his drink in one hand and the other rested lightly on her ankles.

“Witches are taking a bloody long time,” Spike said quietly.

“Yeah, they had a big job,” Xander nodded. “There’s a lot more wards on the store now, Giles doesn’t want to take
any chances. They’re reinforcing his place as well before they come home.”

“This place taken care of?” Spike was pretty sure it was; he’d felt a slight buzz when they’d gotten out of the car earlier. It wasn’t unpleasant, just there, and he was soon used to it.

“Yeah, it is. They top up the spells here every few days, usually while Dawn’s out.” Xander thought for a moment. “We can get them to do your crypt too, if you like. You know, if you want them to, I’m sure they would.”

Spike raised an eyebrow at him. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Cause, you know, you do spend a lot of time inside, and also, if we ever needed to take Dawn there,” he just left the words hanging and looked down at her.

Spike sighed. “Right. All about the Niblet now, isn’t it? Okay, I’ll ask them when they get home. Whenever the hell that might be.”

“Good. That’s good. We need everyone safe.”

Spike wondered if he was included in that, or if Harris really did only mean the Bit.
They flipped through the channels, watching bits and pieces of old reruns, making the odd whispered comment, until Willow and Tara arrived.

“Sorry we were so long, we wanted to make sure we got everything just right.”

“No problem, Red,” Spike said. “You just make sure you’ve got everybody covered yeah?”

“Done!” “Willow said, and dusted her hands.

“Almost done,” Xander told her. “We should do Spike’s place as well, you know, just in case.”

“Oh.Oh! Sure, yeah, we can totally do that,” Willow said, with a smile. “But not tonight, okay? We’re worn out wiccas tonight.”

Spike made arrangements with Willow for the spells to be done the following night while he was out. He didn’t know where he’d go yet, but he was certain it would be nowhere near the crypt. The casting side of things just felt wrong, made his skin crawl and itch.

Xander shook Dawn’s shoulder gently and woke her up. She rolled off the sofa and smiled at him and Spike with bleary eyes.
“Thanks guys, that was fun,” she leaned over and hugged Xander, then surprised Spike with a hug too, but she was up again before he could respond. “I’m so glad you guys are friends now. We should do this again. Night, everyone.” She waved at the room in general and was gone.

Tara looked from Spike to Xander. “I didn’t know you two were friends.”

“Me either,” Willow said. “I thought you hated each other.”

So did I, once upon a time, Spike thought, and just shrugged, waiting to see what Harris would say.

“I’m not dealing in extremes any more, Will.” Xander picked up his car keys and coat from the arm of the chair and headed for the door.

“Don’t look at me,” Spike said, when Willow turned a questioning gaze on him. “I’m here for the Bit.” Spike shoved himself off the very comfortable sofa with some regret and pulled his coat on.

After the obligatory round of goodbyes, he found himself standing on the sidewalk with Xander.

“You need a ride somewhere?” Xander asked.
“No, I’ll walk. Gonna stretch the muscles, kill something,” he said, lighting a long overdue cigarette.

“Need a hand?”

“Not usually,” Spike said, then seeing the poorly hidden disappointment, sighed. “But it couldn’t hurt. I suppose you could drive then.”

“Where?”

“My backyard’ll do tonight.”

They got in the car and travelled in silence. Spike was chewing over Dawn’s assumption about them being friends. Twice weekly beers, pool and conversation, was an unusual place for not-friends to be. But Harris had said no black and white, so which of the infinite shades of grey were they?

“Not-friends, right?” Xander said suddenly, jerking Spike out of his thoughts.

“What?”

“What we said last week. Not-friends. That still stands, right?”

Conversation in the car again. Awkward conversation. Spike didn’t know the reasoning behind the question.
Was he asking because that’s what he wanted or because he’d changed his mind? While Spike was still trying to think of a response, Xander jumped in again.

“Cause I’m thinking, we’ve hated each other for so long, that anything else would take some serious adjusting, and I have so much to deal with right now, I just don’t know if I have room to process anything more than not-friends with the Big Bad. You know?”

Spike had a feeling that they were rapidly leaving ‘not-friends’ behind. He thought, perhaps, that Harris was fully aware of this, but he deferred to the greater, damaged-human need for keeping the status quo, no matter how tenuous the hold. “Yeah, not-friends works for me. That’s just fine.”

The relief rolling off the boy was almost palpable, and Spike got that new feeling that he wasn’t sure yet if he hated or liked. The same feeling he got when Niblet smiled at him, or the watcher forgot himself, and included Spike in the ‘job well done’ speech after an incident. He thought now, that it was a bit of a ‘boy scout’ feeling of having done a good deed. It must have been that very feeling that wasn’t sitting well with his demon. Not well at all.
Spike sat stock still on the ride over, just staring straight ahead. His demon was railing against something and Spike tried to work out what. There were so many things-the minute ‘do-gooder’ feeling at having allayed Harris’s fears; the warmth from an evening keeping the girl happy, and the burgeoning sense of belonging to a group. The demon wanted to belong to a nest, a clan, not a human family. Spike felt the unease and knew the demon would want to tear apart the people who brought about those protective feelings in him. But what remained of the man was stronger, and the fact that he won out was not solely the influence of the chip.

At the cemetery, Spike paced while Xander opened the trunk, took out his axe and shoved a few stakes into his pockets. Xander waved a hand, offering Spike a choice of weapons, but Spike just shook his head impatiently.

“Not this time,” he said, knowing he needed to let the demon out, to get himself back in balance. “Keep your eyes open tonight, yeah? No sneaking up on me. No sudden moves my way.”

Xander snorted. “Like I could.”

“Fair warning, Harris. I’m a bit twitchy.”
Xander sized him up, and Spike let his face slip partially under the scrutiny. “Right, I can see. Just remember we’re on the same team.”

The demon inside howled at that, and Spike’s face changed completely. “Let’s just do this. Heads up, yeah?”

Spike turned on his heel and strode deep into the dark. He could hear the increase in breathing and heartbeat, as the boy hurried to keep up, and knew any other vampires nearby would pick up on that in an instant. Spike moved faster.

“We in a hurry?” Xander panted from behind him.

“Could say that.”

Spike wove his way through the headstones and vaults, and it wasn’t long before there was a growl and a yelp behind him. He’d been right. The boy’s humanity was like a beacon.

Spike grinned around his fangs, as he turned and saw Harris was held tight to the vampire behind him, pinned by his own axe across his throat. Spike sniffed the air, assessed Harris’s position, and decided it wasn’t immediately life threatening; it was quick lesson time.
“Found yourself a vamp there, have you?” Spike said, slowly stalking towards them.

“Back off, I’m having this one,” the vampire snarled.

Spike ignored it and spoke slowly and clearly to Xander. “Shame you don’t have a stake. You look like you’re about to collapse.”

Spike saw the comprehension on Xander’s face, and watched with satisfaction, as one of the boy’s hands stopped pulling at the axe handle, and fumbled in his jeans pocket. Xander pulled a stake out and let his body go limp.

The vampire gave a triumphant laugh and loosened its hold on Xander’s axe. At the same time, Xander turned his body and slammed the stake home. He grabbed for his axe as it fell with the pile of dust.

“Not bad,” Spike said. “You’re thinking quick.”

“You were gonna leave me to him?” Xander said, incredulously.

“It was a fledge, I could smell the dirt on him,” Spike said, lighting a cigarette. “Even you can off a soddin’ fledge now and then.”
“Yeah, thanks for that; compliment was it?” Xander asked sourly, brushing his coat off.

Compliments were for friends, and Spike was playing by Harris’s rules. “Observation,” he said and walked away. He still needed to find something to kill slowly and violently.

His wish was granted when they came across a large, muscular demon on the verge of disemboweling a homeless man. Spike quickly snatched the man away, shoved him towards Xander with a warning to stay back, and waded in to the fight.

Spike took his time, and took his fair share of blows. He gave his demon free rein to toy and to torment. He enjoyed every minute. There was blood trickling into his eyes and down into his shirt, he was sure there were broken ribs, maybe some breaks in his hands too. When Spike took an eye off the demon, for just a moment, to check on Harris, he caught a swing to the head that sent him flying. Leaping back to his feet, Spike’s demon howled its joy at the simplicity of the pain and the fight.

As he spun to attack again, he saw the demon taking a swipe at Xander, its fist connecting with the side of his head. Harris fell heavily against a headstone and cried out, but before he’d even hit the grass, Spike had
growled and flown at the demon again, raining blow after blow, until he had it beaten back against the side of a crypt. One roundhouse kick and it was on its hands and knees on the ground. Spike leapt on its back and twisted its head sharply, letting loose a harsh laugh at the sound of shattered bones. He dropped the body to the ground.

When his demon had finished gloating and had finally settled, Spike remembered Xander and ran over to the moaning heap of human lying on the ground.

“This hurts. I’m just going to stay here okay?” Xander groaned. “It’s not so far to fall if I stay down. I should have run, like that smelly guy you threw at me.”

“If you ever go running off in a cemetery at night like that idiot, I’ll kick your arse myself. Get up, I need to check you out.” Spike ignored the pain in his own hands and slowly sat him upright. Xander tried to jerk away from the touch but cried out again.

The boy’s face was glistening with sweat, he was gritting his teeth and favouring his left arm. Spike crouched down and looked him over. There was a lot of blood coming from Harris’s head, but he could see it was only a graze. Slightly more serious and obviously more painful, judging by the way Harris was wincing and holding himself, was the dislocated shoulder. “Right. Your head’s
fine, but that shoulder is out, you need it popped back in.”

Xander panted with the pain. “Not going to the hospital, I hate that place.”

“No need, I can fix it for you.” Spike frowned. “Gonna hurt like hell though.”

“I don’t know if I want you playing around with my bones,” Xander tried to move away from him, but the pain stopped him cold. “What if you accidentally pull it off?”

Spike just rolled his eyes. “Take it easy, Harris. You don’t spend all that time living with Angelus, and not know a thing or two about putting body parts back in the right place.”

“You won’t make it worse?”

“Trust me.”

It was a throw away line, not meant to be a stumper, but Harris froze and considered him for quite a while.

“Okay, then.”

Spike squashed the unfamiliar contented feeling that Harris’s response triggered in him, and pushed the
unhappy demon aside too. He nodded and carefully helped Xander upright, gritting his teeth against the pain in his ribs and hands, but pulled back sharply when Xander reached out his right hand towards his forehead.

“l-, sorry. You’re bleeding, there’s a cut. I was just checking.”

“Don’t worry about it. I can sort it out,” Spike said and led the way back to his crypt.

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Inside, Spike pulled up an old stool and sat the boy down. “Right then.” Spike waved a bottle of whiskey in front of his face. “You want a bit of anaesthetic first?”

“Its going to hurt that much?”

“I’m shoving your arm back into its socket. Yes it’s going to hurt that much.” You and me both, Spike thought as he flexed his fingers. A few were broken, but he’d still be able to get a good enough grip. But it wasn’t just his fingers that were going to hurt.

Xander just scowled and snatched the bottle out of his hand, groaning as the pain in his shoulder and arm flared. He took a sniff of the contents and recoiled, then handed it back to Spike. “You know what? Why don’t you let me
take a look at your head before I’m too anaesthetised to see straight?”

“I can take care of it later. Sit down and have a drink or five. I’ll fix your head while that stuff kicks in.”

Xander, sighed, raised the bottle to his lips and cringed as he swallowed. “God that’s awful. It burns. Are you sure you’re meant to drink it?”

Spike sneered and pointed to the bottle. “Course you are. Drink up. Not doing this till you’ve got a bit more of that in you.” He dug around for a first aid kit. It wasn’t especially well stocked, but on the odd occasion, he’d needed to suture himself up, or bind a bone till it healed. Since he’d begun patrolling with Harris, he’d acquired a few other things, antiseptic included, just on the off chance that something might come.

“Do I want to know where all that came from?” Xander asked, looking at the hospital name stamped on some of the packages.

“I don’t know. Do you?”

Xander sighed. “I guess I don’t. Not if it gets me fixed.”
“Drink.” Spike prodded him to lift the bottle again. He’d obviously not drunk enough yet; Spike’s chip sent him short sharp bursts of pain as he tended to the boy.

He cleaned the wound on Xander’s head and tried to ignore the twitching, hissing human under his hands. He also ignored the scent of fresh blood, as enticing as it was, and tried to get as little as possible on his hands. It only took a minute, and just as well. As he swabbed some antiseptic over the wound, Xander started to sway in his seat. Right, time to work on the arm.

“Done,” Spike said and washed the blood from his hands before he was tempted to taste it. Even not-friends didn’t do that. He shook his head as the last of the twinges from the chip died away.

“Ow.” Xander reached up and gingerly touched the wound. “Ow.”

“Yeah, so you said,” Spike said as he cleaned up the mess. “Stop bloody touching it then and stop moving so much, you dopey git.” Spike pointed to the almost empty bottle. “Might as well finish that.”

Xander held his nose with one hand and swallowed quickly. For a moment Spike thought he might bring it all back up, but after a few dry swallows, he was okay and
pushed the bottle back towards Spike. “No more. Can’t stomach any more. Just do this.”

“Lightweight,” Spike scoffed. “Right then, here we go.” Spike thought about numbing himself first too. No time though. He could do that after.

Spike positioned Xander’s arm. Gritting his teeth as he felt the chip begin to fire again, he tried to tune out Xander’s gasps and moans of pain. Fighting the stabbing pains in his own head, Spike bent, twisted and pushed until he felt the bones shift back into place. He knew he’d done it right, when the chip stilled again. Harris had made little sound, but his face had paled and Spike thought he might vomit; but one long loud yell seemed to do the trick and the colour gradually returned to the boy’s face.

Sharp pains shot through his head, residual sparks from the chip. Spike worked to keep his face calm. He mustn’t have done too good a job because the boy was looking at him with a frown.

“Spike, are you okay?”

“Just fine. Nothing a good dose of Jack won’t fix.”
“Oh, god, it’s your chip isn’t it?” Xander was eyeing him with some concern. “Why did you do that if you knew it would fire?”

“There was a job needed doing. It only hurt for a minute or two, nothing as bad as your shoulder. Forget about it, yeah?”

“Are you okay?”

“I said I’m fine, just leave it be now. What about you?”

“Much better. Thanks.” Xander stood, wobbled, sat, then stood again. He swayed on the spot for a moment before looking around and sighing with relief at the two new reclining armchairs Spike had acquired. “Ah, stability. Maybe that’ll stop the room spinning. Since when d’you have a spinning crypt?”


“There are no words for how much I don’t want it,” Xander said, sighing as he dropped into the chair and fumbled with the lever. “And when d’you get new furniture?”
“Clem. A poker buddy. He came by once, there was only one chair so one of us had to sit on the floor. Next day, he turns up with a couple of guys carrying those things. Only cost me a few tabbies and a Siamese.”

Xander turned around to pull a face at him. “Those broke?” Xander slurred, nodding at the fingers Spike was carefully checking.

“Oh, a few of them. Some of my ribs too.” Spike wound tape around the damaged fingers, holding them straight so they’d heal properly while he slept. There were some fractures in his hand too, but the fresh blood would take care of those soon enough.

“You like it, huh?” Xander mumbled, still trying to work the recliner.

Spike sighed and kicked the lever sending Xander jerking backwards. “Broken bones?”

“Fighting.”

“Course I do. I’m a demon.”

“Anya was a demon, she didn’t like fighting.”

“Yeah? She ain’t a vampire though.”

“She’s not as scary either.”
“No need to humour me, Harris.” Spike packed the tape away, grabbed a full bottle of Jack, and stretched himself out in the other armchair. He sighed and drank the whiskey, waiting for it to take the edge off his headache.

“M’not,” Xander said, curling up in the chair. “You scared the shit outta me, with your vamp face and everything. I haven’t seen you fight like that since, well, a really, really long time. Really. Long.”

Spike took a long drink. Shame Harris wasn’t much of a drinker, it really loosened him up, made him chatty. “I don’t usually do it when you lot are around. Tonight was different, I needed it.”

“Yeah. It looked like-..” Xander yawned long and loud and his eyes began to close. “Looked like you did. I bet that demon thing inside you hates you being with us, and helping us. Probably really hates the chip too. You must feel better now. I hope so.” His voice faded away as he spoke.

Spike just stared, lost for words. He’d not thought any of them would even think about his demon, let alone realise how it was affected by his new situation. From the rumbling inside, he knew the revelation had shocked the demon too. He was going to answer when he heard the drunken snores coming from the boy.
He considered the human in his chair. Bloody odd arrangement for not-friends. Spike sighed as he recalled the split second feeling of concern, as Xander was hit earlier. He was pretty sure that worry like that, no matter how quickly it passed, and especially in his demon state, meant not-friends was an increasingly erroneous label.

Spike felt the tingle that told him dawn was just about there. No time to drive the boy home, or even stick him back in his car. Right. Looked like Harris would be staying. No doubt he would be none too impressed in the morning, but Spike would venture out into sunlight for no man. He took a last swig of his whiskey, bolted the door and climbed down the ladder to sleep off his injuries.

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When Spike woke up that afternoon he knew three things. One, Harris had tossed his cookies at some stage during the day; Spike hoped it had been outside as he suspected. Two, Harris was gone. Three, it was still light and no self respecting vampire should be awake at such an hour. Spike pulled the covers back over his head and slept until it was dark enough to go out and let the demon loose again.
Spike felt the light buzz as he left his crypt for the bar the following Tuesday. The witches had put the whammy on his place last weekend as planned, and he found it was almost pleasant walking through the wards. Certainly, the knowledge that his home was that bit safer didn’t hurt. Even though Clem had installed, and giggled over, deadbolts- *dead*bolts, get it, Spike?- the wards would offer that extra bit of protection for anyone who happened to stop by.

Arriving at the bar, Spike cast an eye around, and seeing their table empty, placed his order and sat to wait. He didn’t have long alone, before Xander arrived. Spike saw him come through the door, and did the classic double take, then frowned. Harris had smiled. Not just one of those guilty twitches of the lips he’d been prone to lately, but an honest to goodness stretching of the lips, crinkling of the eyes, smile. It was good to see.
It had been gone by the time Spike looked back, and on second glance, Harris had seemed a little flushed, but it had definitely been there. Odd. Spike picked at a few nuts while Harris bought the drinks and came over to the table.

“Hey.” He put the beers down and sat opposite Spike in his usual spot, immediately leaning back in his seat, with beer in hand.

Spike just nodded to him and picked up his drink. And now he’ll cross his leg; just a touch of a barrier between us to keep him feeling safe, Spike thought, and waited. It didn’t happen. Interesting. Spike wondered what else would be different.

“Thanks for fixing me up the other night. I hate hospitals.”

Again, the thanks. Spike kept his face neutral, didn’t show any surprise. The boy was three for three in as many minutes. “No thanks needed; that’s what fr-, first aid kits are for.”

“You seem to be okay. All healed.”

“Yeah, one of the many benefits. I was back in one piece and out on the town again Sunday night, while the witches did their thing.”
“You patrolled?”

Spike shook his head. “Not patrol, just hunting.”

To his credit, the boy kept his cool. “Humans?”

“Still got a chip.” Spike tapped his head. “Just meant it wasn’t as businesslike as a patrol. Needed to let the demon out a bit longer.”

An appreciative look passed over Xander’s face. “I would’ve liked to see that.”

Inside Spike, the demon stirred at Xander’s words, and an inkling of something flitted across Spike’s mind. “Would you now. And why is that?”

Xander thought about it for a while before he answered. “When you’re the demon you fight different. It’s more, umm, vicious. It’s like that’s the way it’s meant to be you know? There’s no fear and no holding back, I can see how much you need it and how much you like it.” He shrugged. “I don’t know, it’s just an amazing thing to see.”

Spike twitched an eyebrow at him. “It’s a dangerous thing to see. You not worried? Scared?”

“Why? Would you hurt me too?”
“Can’t, can I?”

“Oh, right. Sorry, I forget sometimes.”

“You forget?” Yet you’re still here, regular as clockwork, fighting the fight alongside me. Again, the demon stirred.

“Sometimes. But, if you could? Would you? Is that why I should be worried?”

Spike focussed inwards, and tried to feel out what was making the demon unsettled. He could detect confusion and traces of anger.

“Spike? You have to think about that? Should I be worried here?”

The boy was leaning forward with some anxiety. Spike caught himself. “No, no worries. Chip or no chip, you’re safe from me.”

“Okay, then.” Xander sat back. “So Willow and Tara mojoed up your place then?”

“Yeah.”

And quick as that, all was normal. The boy had taken him at his word, no questions asked. Even when he was concerned about Spike’s response, he hadn’t up and run in fear. Hadn’t even backed away. Spike wondered how
Harris could accept that so easily, but not be able to deal with the fact that they had become friends.

Perhaps there was something more to it. Admitting they were friends must be making Harris face up to something else he couldn’t deal with. Surely, the revelation that the vampire you had hated with a vengeance for so long, had just about guaranteed your safety, would be right up there too, but for some reason, it seemed easier for him to accept.

Spike couldn’t remember the human mind being this much of a mystery, but then again it had been a while since he’d had one.

From there, the conversation flowed easily. Magic, mainly- anecdotes about Willow-spells gone wrong, and Drusilla’s attempts at various castings. Spike listened with amusement and Harris even managed a laugh or two at Spike’s stories.

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They’d gotten to the third round and Spike realised it was about that time that they usually headed off for a patrol. His ribs, hands and head were long healed, but he knew Harris would still be feeling that dislocation, if not the dregs of a hangover. Maybe it wouldn’t be the greatest
night for the boy to go on a patrol. Bloody humans were so fragile.

“Another round?” Xander asked, pointing at Spike’s empty glass. “Or do you just want to head out?”

“I might give the patrol a miss tonight, yeah?” Spike flexed and put on a wince. “Still a bit stiff from the weekend. Must have taken more of a beating than I thought.”

“Yeah? Maybe you need more blood. If you want, we can go see TJ?”

Again, Spike felt the rumblings that meant the demon was edgy. “No need, I went last night, so I’ve got plenty at home.”

“You didn’t have any problems? TJ helped you out?”

“Yeah, it was fine. He had a couple of today’s donations, and some from yesterday. Should keep me going for a while, unless I get the munchies. Sometimes that happens when I watch those bloody movies.” Spike smirked. “Same thing probably happens when you watch that Willy Wonka git.”
“Not so much with the blood cravings. But I get what you mean.” Harris fished his car keys out of his pocket. “Okay then. You want a ride?”

“Yeah, why not.”

The ride back to the cemetery was quiet. Spike could tell Harris was mulling something over. He fidgeted and let out small sighs that probably no one else could have picked up on, but Spike heard, easily.

Harris pulled the car over at the gates and shut the engine off. He had that look, like he wanted to say something, but was too afraid. Spike was opening the door when the boy started speaking.

“Feels strange not going on patrol after the bar. It’s still so early.”

“Neither of us is really up for it tonight, though.”

“No I guess not. My shoulder is pretty sore.”

“All the more reason for a quiet night with the telly.”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

He seemed to be waiting for something, and Spike sorted back through their conversation, threw caution to the
wind, and took a stab. “You want to come in and watch? There might be a beer in the fridge.”

There was a distinct relieving of tension when Spike said that and Harris almost smiled. “Sure, that’d be okay.”

“Right then. Lock this thing up and we’re off. Maybe we can’t kill anything tonight, but there’s no reason we can’t watch someone else do it.”

Spike waited till the lights flashed, signalling the car was secured, then set off through the dark to his crypt. Several times now he’d almost offered this, but tonight was the first time he’d felt it was what Harris had been after.

Now that he better understood his demon’s position, the arrangement between himself and Harris was sitting better. Spike was in no way reluctant to admit he considered the boy a friend, but if it made Xander more comfortable, then he would edge around that for the time being.

Inside, Spike loaded a movie, nuked the last bag of popcorn and set them both up with drinks. Harris appeared relaxed, lying back in the same chair he’d slept in on Saturday night. Spike took the other one.
“Not a bad chair, this one. I had a decent sleep in it,” Xander said, tipping it back a little.

“Yeah, done that a time or two myself. I sleep up here a bit more, now that my soddin’ door isn’t being kicked in at all hours by the bloody sla-...” Spike stopped and inwardly cursed his lack of thought. He turned apologetic eyes on Xander, but was surprised to see the boy covering a smile.

“She had a habit of doing that didn’t she?” he said, with both fondness and a hint of sadness.

“Certainly made an entrance a time or two. Luckily, Clem got the door fixed right quick for me.”

“Clem’s the chair guy right?”

“Yeah, the chair guy, the power guy, the door bolts guy, the kittens guy. A bit of an allrounder, is saggy Clem.”

“I don’t want to know about the kittens,” he said, shaking his head. “I didn’t know you had other friends. I’d like to meet him one day. You know, if he doesn’t bite.”

Spike let the ‘other friends’ comment slip. “Not unless you’re a bag of Cheetos or a tabby. Good bloke.”
“You had to go and mention the kitten thing, didn’t you.” Xander opened his beer and grabbed a handful of popcorn. “What are we watching?”

“What do you bloody think?”

“Blood, guts and gore?”

“And expendable bimbos. You know the ones that always go to the basement or the attic or down the dark alley on their own, so the guys like me can eat them. But they have nice knockers usually, so it’s a win-win.”

Spike caught a quick frown on Harris’s forehead, before he smoothed it out again. “This is like a how-to guide for you isn’t it?” he said.

“Are you bloody kidding?” Spike pointed to the bits of food lying on the floor near the TV. “This is the kind of movie I throw my popcorn at. The fight sequences are shit, the vampires are just a soddin’ disgrace, and you can’t smell all that blood. Bleeding frustrating is what it is.”

“Yet you have a stack of them,” Xander said, indicating the carton of DVDs next to the TV, all slasher and horror movies.

“Well, yeah, its fun isn’t it?” he said, belligerently.
Xander snorted. “Sure, whatever.”

“If you’re gonna give me shit for my choice of movie,” Spike said, with a flick of his head. “There’s the door, Harris.”

Again with the frown, but he quickly recovered. “No, it’s all good. On with the show.”

“Right then.” Spike was trying to ignore the guilty feeling nudging at him for suggesting Harris should go, when the boy so obviously needed to stay.

Xander sat silently for a while, just watching and occasionally glancing around the crypt. It didn’t take long for him to ease into it though, and before long, he was joining Spike in tossing the popcorn at the hero and bad guys alike.

Spike wondered if the boy had ever looked at these movies through a vampire’s eyes. Judging by his reaction, and the fact that he was becoming nearly as critical as Spike of the villain’s techniques, Spike guessed no, but he seemed to be enjoying it.

Spike waited until Harris was engrossed in the next scene before he gave him the once over. Definitely he was less uptight. The heavy grief that had hung over him for the last two months was noticeably lifting, and he was much
more comfortable with Spike’s company. It had been a long time now, since he’d refused to meet Spike’s eyes when they spoke, and the fact that the boy was here willingly in Spike’s crypt, ‘hanging out’ as they said, just showed how far he’d come.

But still, he was missing something. There was a scent about him, Spike couldn’t put his finger on it. There were the hidden smiles on arrival, the frowns on dismissal or at a seemingly innocuous comment from Spike. Something else was going on with the boy, but Spike didn’t think they were at the point where he could ask about it. Just one of those things. Work with it, wait it out. Meantime enjoy the novelty of having a human for a friend.

**Part Seven**

Xander slammed the two beers down on the table. “Crappiest day in the history of crappy days.”

Spike reached for his glass. “Problem?”

“That would be putting it lightly. A bad load of timber came, so the joists kept splitting, no matter what saw we used. Then, there was a bit of subsidence on one end of the site, so the new foundations have to be pulled up
while they look into that. God, I’ve never been so happy to see the end of a week.”

“Well, sit back, have a beer, take it easy, yeah? You got two days before you have to worry about that again.”

“You want to patrol tonight? I want to get out there and kick something’s ass.”

“Thought you’d want to head back to my place. We’re only halfway through that Elm Street box set you brought over last week.”

“Oh.” Xander thought for a moment. “Okay, how about a quick circuit of your cemetery, then what? We’re up to number three?”

“Yeah, something like that. They all blend in to each other after a while, don’t they?”

“Except the Alien Quadrilogy. I thought you liked that one.”

Spike nodded. “Still can’t believe you had me watching a soddin’ space movie. It’s not right, is it?”

“We can’t keep getting the slashers, they’re so boring now.”

“But they’re bloody funny.”
“Elm Street is pretty funny.”

“Yeah, true.”

“So? Patrol, then finish Freddy?”

Spike nodded. He held his hand out to shake on it, but nearly withdrew when the boy just stared at it as though it might bite him. Xander finally reached out and shook. Warm. Rough. And was that a blush? “Done deal, then. But a couple more beers wouldn’t go astray, right now.”

Xander looked at the two empty glasses. “Your round. Coke will be fine.”

“Not so bloody quick when it’s your turn, are you?” Spike snorted, but went to buy another round.

While he waited at the bar, Spike took the occasional sideways glance at Xander. What a difference a few weeks made; time and a change of routine. Maybe they’d been treading water, not actually getting anywhere. Only ever meeting in this bar, where they’d both first come to escape and deal after Buffy’s death. Perhaps the change of venue had been what the boy needed to begin to get back to himself again. It had been a little over two weeks since Spike had invited Xander in to watch a movie and they’d fallen into this new routine.
It had begun easily enough, Xander had needed time out to let his shoulder heal.

Still they had their Tuesday and Friday, still meeting at the bar for drinks and wings. But then, instead of the trips to a cemetery, to take it all out on some vampire or demon, they were doing a quick lap of Spike’s grounds, taking out a few things here or there, then going back to his crypt.

There had even been the odd extra night. Sometimes after a meeting at the Magic Box, or when Xander had offered Spike a ride to see TJ, they’d ended up at Spike’s again throwing junk food at another bad horror movie.

All that aside though, there was still no recognition of this non-friendship at any other time. When they met with the others in the store, Xander didn’t make any reference to the time they spent together. If they made plans to go out, it was only ever outside, out of earshot of the others. Spike wondered about that, but it didn’t actually bother him, so he let it go. Obviously, the boy still had some issues, and that was to be expected. It had been a difficult time for him.

Back at the table, Xander was leaning back against the wall, his eyes closed. Spike gave his chair a kick and handed him a coke.
“This is why we’re only half way through those movies. You keep falling asleep on me.”

Xander blush again and looked away uncomfortably. “Oh, um, sorry.”

Strange thing to be embarrassed about, best fix that. “Not to worry though,” Spike said. “I won’t take it personally.”

“I wasn’t sleeping, I was just thinking.”

“With your eyes closed?”

“It helps me concentrate.”

“Right.” Spike smirked. “Makes perfect sense.”

“Shut up.”

“You’re losing your touch there. Shut up? Best you can do?”

“’Fraid so. Tonight anyway. I’m not tired, just exhausted. Nothing a caffeine-laden carbonated beverage can’t fix.” Xander picked up his coke and raised the glass to Spike with a nod.
“Cheers.” Spike took a long drink and watched Xander over the top of the glass. “Anything you need to off load?”

“Huh?”

“Problem shared and all that?”

“Oh. No.” Xander leaned forward over the table and considered the bottom of his glass.

It didn’t happen often, but Spike was surprised. This was the first time in many weeks he’d seen Xander close himself off like that. He was in two minds about whether to push the point or not; make the boy talk. Surely they’d been spending enough time together that Spike could do that. Bugger it. Of course he could, hunched over human be damned.

“If it’s something I can help you out with, then let me know, yeah?”

Xander looked up, startled. Spike knew it was because he’d disregarded the unspoken rule, when Xander clearly didn’t want to talk.
“Come on now, Harris. We’ve been doing this for over two months. Don’t I get to ask a question every now and then?”

Slowly, Xander sat back in his seat, crossed his legs and folded his arms. “It’s, um, it’s-.” He gave a heavy sigh. “Look, I can’t okay? Not right now anyway. As soon as I get it straight in my own head, then maybe I’ll -. Just not now, okay?”

“Your call. You want an ear, let me know.”

Xander nodded, tipped down he last of his coke, and gave himself a good shake. “I’m good. Let’s go dust something and see what that crazy Krueger is up to this time.” He pasted on a smile, but to Spike’s eyes it was obviously forced.

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When they arrived at the cemetery, Xander opened the trunk, offering Spike a choice of weapons, but took only two stakes for himself. Spike wasn’t going to take anything, but on seeing Xander’s plans, he grabbed an axe.

Maybe his shoulder was back to form, maybe it wasn’t. Either way, Spike wanted to be prepared for anything. Regardless of the happy front he was putting on, if the
boy was going in with stakes, he was trying to deal with something and Spike would be the back up in case he lost focus.

They wandered the dark paths for a while, not speaking. It was a quiet night and Spike was about to call it quits, when familiar sounds and scents from off to his left caught his attention.

“This way,” he said and led Xander down another path.

When they arrived at the next set of burial plots, Spike took a seat on a grave to wait and patted the spot next to him. He lit a cigarette as Xander sat down.

This was a familiar routine and Xander would know exactly what was going on. Spike had heard the sound of earth being disturbed and smelled the fresh soil. Someone was waking up.

Xander’s attention was focussed on the new grave about fifteen feet away. The earth bulged and rippled, fresh clods of soil rolled away from the plot. Xander touched his hand to the stakes in his pocket, but did not take them out. His gaze never slipped from the grave.

Spike watched him with interest. He knew that as soon as the fledge broke through and climbed up, Harris would be there, catching it off guard before it got its bearings. It
was a good match, a seconds-old fledge was strong, starving, but relatively easy to dispatch. Spike would stand back and keep an eye on things, intervening only if it looked like Xander couldn’t cope.

The only thing that worried him was that Xander had only brought a stake and he was out of practice after his shoulder injury. Hence Spike’s axe. Spike backtracked through his thoughts a moment. Worried? Yes, he was. He made no bones about it; he liked the boy. He was good company- even if he was the blue ribbon winner in denial. But that was just a part of him, and Spike supposed, given the boy’s background and the bloody town he lived in, denial was safer. As long as you knew when it was time to step into reality.

On the ground in front of them, a pale hand reached through the soil and Xander gave a grunt of satisfaction. Together they got up, but Spike fell back to allow Xander some room.

Spike couldn’t help but think that tonight, Xander was slipping backwards. The closed body language at the table, the long silences, the stakes instead of the bigger weapon. As Spike watched him fight, he became more certain there was something wrong. More wrong than
usual. Definitely more wrong than just a bad day on the site.

Xander’s face was set in a mask of grim determination. While he dodged and swung at the vampire, he seemed stiffer than normal, and was landing less hits and taking more. Spike hovered nearby with the axe, ready to step in if he was needed, although Xander would never ask for help, he just accepted that Spike knew when he was floundering and didn’t argue with the interference.

The boy was tiring. The vampire was getting in more and more hits as they went on and Xander was bleeding from several small cuts on his face and hands. Spike decided to call a halt. He slung the axe over his shoulder and stepped into the fight.

“No. Not tonight,” Xander said breathlessly, wiping a trickle of blood from his eyebrow. “Let me do this.”

“No, can’t let you get yourself beaten to a pulp,” Spike said and waved the axe at the fledge. “The watcher would have my hide.”

“It’s none of his business. Nobody’s but mine.”

Stubborn git. Spike decided to play dirty. “Well then, I’ll be sure to tell that to Dawn, when she asks why you’re in the hospital, or why you were turned. I’ll just say ‘sorry
Bit, it wasn’t anyone’s business.’ She’ll be okay with that, no doubt.”

“Why do you think it’s your business?” Xander asked, trying unsuccessfully to dodge Spike and reach the fledge.

Spike kept swinging his axe, warding off the vampire while he spoke to Xander. “It’s my business, because I’ll be the one patching you up, remember?”

Xander’s head swung back as the vampire’s fist connected with his jaw. He stumbled a few steps, then sat down heavily. The vampire wasn’t far off and quickly had him by the front of the shirt, fangs heading for Xander’s throat.

“Fine!” Xander shouted.

Spike was there before the sound of his words had died and Xander was soon showered in a cloud of fine dust. Spike held out a hand and hauled Xander to his feet.

“You sure you don’t want to talk about anything?”

Xander brushed the dust from his hair and shook off his jacket. “Sure. Okay then, let’s talk. Um, do you think they’ll deliver a pizza to your crypt? I’m kinda hungry.”
“Not the conversation I meant.”

“I know. But that’s all I’ve got for you, right now.”

“Fair enough, then. Like that is it?” Spike turned and headed for his crypt. “Come on, you need to get that blood off you before you attract another vamp.”

When he didn’t hear Xander moving, Spike stopped and looked back. The boy was standing there looking at the blood on his fingers, deep in thought. Spike shocked him out of it with a short, sharp yell.

“Oi! There are any number of things out here that will come running if they get a whiff of you. Move your arse now.”

Xander’s face reddened for the third time that night, but he fell in behind Spike.

They walked back to the crypt in silence and Spike held the door, ushering Xander through. He sat the boy on a chair, pulled out the first aid kit and began sponging off the blood.

Xander sighed and looked up at Spike. “Seriously. Will they deliver pizza here?”
Part Eight

Spike woke earlier than he normally would have done and lay still, trying to fathom why he was awake so early in the afternoon. A low hum of voices came to him from upstairs- the telly was running. He listened carefully and heard a soft chuckling over the voices. Okay, Saturday afternoon, and already the weekend was shaping up to be different. The usual Saturday routine was that he woke up to an empty crypt; Harris having dragged himself out of the recliner sometime during the wee pre-noon hours.

But today, the boy was still there. Spike thought he should probably go up and see what the hell was going on, but instead he just lay still listening. It wasn’t often he heard Xander laugh, it was a good sound. The kind of sound that made him smile. Suddenly, Spike wanted to be upstairs. He pulled on a pair of jeans and climbed the ladder.
“Don’t you have a home to go to?” Spike asked as he headed for his fridge.

“Oh, sorry. I should have gone before you woke up.” Xander tilted the chair down and looked around for his shoes.

“Why? Got an appointment? I was kidding, you don’t have to leave. Sit, stay.”

Xander paused with his socks in his hand. “I just wanted to watch some of the special features, but they were pretty good, and I guess time just got away from me.”

Spike sat down in the other chair with a mug of warm blood and smirked when he saw the pizza box on the floor by the chair. “Yeah? And maybe there was no cold pizza back at your place?”

“That had a little to do with it, maybe.” Xander put his socks down and held the box out. “Breakfast?”

Spike shrugged and took a slice, dipping the corner of it into his mug.

“Let me know when you’re done with that,” Xander said, as he settled back and focused determinedly in on the television.
“Just pretend its ketchup.”

“Ketchup doesn’t drip like blood.”

“Pretend ketchup might.”

“Just eat it quick, before I barf on your floor.”

“Don’t you bloody dare!”

Xander waved his hand. “Less talking, more gross eating.”

Spike sighed, but couldn’t stop himself from smiling around the slice of pizza. He soon finished both that and his blood. “Happy now?”

“I can be happy and grossed out at the same time, thankyou very much.”

“Yeah, you’re a right multi-tasker, you are.”

“Damn straight.”

Spike just smirked. Very gradually, Xander was returning to himself. There were times like this when he seemed to forget his worries, and he was the back chatting, smart arse of old. Often it didn’t last, and the smallest thing could send him backwards, but Spike was learning to
recognise the triggers and was able to avoid them more easily now.

“You coming to the Magic Box tonight?” Xander asked.

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

“Oh. Okay then.”

Maybe not all the triggers. Was that disappointment Spike caught on his face? Damn it, it was. Why should that bother him so much? He shouldn’t be swayed by the boy’s emotions like that. Liking him was one thing, but feeling guilty for disappointing him was another altogether.

“S’pose I could put in an appearance, though. I should check up on the Niblet anyway.”

“Whatever.”

It was delivered in an overly casual way, but Spike easily detected the relaxing of his face and body. Spike wondered what the boy wanted him there for. Couldn’t be for company, there was plenty of that. Maybe he wanted to go out again tonight and this was his way of arranging that. Who knew? Spike guessed he’d find out in a few hours.
Xander had left and gone home to change clothes and shower. When Spike arrived at the store later, he was already there and acknowledged Spike’s entry with a slight sagging of his body and a look of relief. Spike immediately knew something was wrong. It wasn’t just a ‘hey my not-friend arrived’ relief. It was more a ‘here’s someone who can help me’ look. Spike raised an eyebrow in question at him, but Xander just gave a small shake of his head.

Tonight there was definitely an undercurrent; something had happened or was still happening. He took up a position on the stairs and scanned the room. The watcher was working the account books and didn’t seem worried in the slightest. He knew the Niblet wouldn’t be at home alone, so she must be out in the training room; if he strained, he could hear her soft voice singing along with the radio. The two witches were sitting at the table, and Harris was there opposite.

That’s where the feeling was coming from- the boy and the witches. Or just Red, to be more precise. There was something going on between her and the boy. Spike wondered if that’s why Xander wanted him to be there.
He took in their body language. Xander was holding himself apart from them. Usually they would be huddled together over a book, or just sitting close by each other for support. Not tonight, Xander was as far away from Willow as he could be, without leaving the table. Meanwhile the two witches were sitting together, Red unsuccessfully trying to catch Xander’s eye.

“I’ll be in the basement for a time. I need to do a small stock take,” Giles told the room in general, as he came out from behind the counter with a pile of papers. “Please don’t break anything while I’m gone. And Spike, do stay out of my brandy.”

As far as Spike was concerned, that was as good as an invitation, and when the watcher had gone to the basement, he poured himself a glass. While he was behind the counter, Spike could hear Red whispering and ruffling the pages of a book. As soon as he came out, she stopped and looked at him.

“Um, Spike, why don’t you go check on Dawnie? She’s been out there a while by herself, and you know she doesn’t like that much.” Whether she’d intended it or not, it came out as more of an order than a question.

Spike just stared back and raised his eyebrows.
“Oh. Please? Would you mind?” Willow said, a little apprehensively.

Spike glanced at Xander and got an almost imperceptible nod. “Only had to say please, Red,” he said slowly. “A little manners go a long way.”

“Sorry, Spike. I’m just a bit-, well, sorry. Would you please sit with Dawnie for a little while? She likes you being there.”

He snatched a women’s magazine from the table and held it up. “Course I will. We’ll talk about-.” Spike looked at the cover. “Fifty fashion tips for a sizzling summer. Fifty? Oh, bollocks.”

Spike rolled up the magazine, waved it at Xander and the girls and grabbed a soda for Dawn before he headed out the back. He shut the door behind him and was met with a dazzling smile.

“Spike! I didn’t know you were here.” Dawn switched off the radio and jumped off the couch to hug him.

“Yeah, I thought I’d best come and see if anyone needed beating up for not looking after you. Seems it’s everyone. Why are you out here on your own?” He handed her the magazine and the drink and she sat down on the couch again.
“Oh, they’ve been in a bad mood tonight. It was easier to just wait out here, quieter. Do you know what’s going on? They won’t tell me anything.”

“No idea, pet. But if you’re real quiet I can listen in.”

“No good, I tried that already. They just keep whispering.”

“Did you try using your vampire hearing, love?”

“Oh.” Dawn settled back on the couch and shooed him towards the door. “I’ll be quiet as a mouse. You won’t even know I’m here.”

Spike snorted softly at her and stood behind the door. Their whispered voices were muffled but he could hear clearly enough. He listened for a moment. No wonder the boy had wanted him here. What he heard was enough to make his face shift before he could stop it. Quickly, he shook it off, hoping Dawn was far enough away that she hadn’t seen.

“Spike, is something wrong?” she called softly. “What are they saying?”

“Nothing you’d be interested in Bit,” he whispered back. “Something about finances, and the house, and ah, insurance. Nothing wrong, just bloody boring shite. You
just keep reading that thing, it’s got to be more interesting than this twaddle.”

Spike tuned out her shuffling and sipping noises, and focused back on the conversation outside. Willow was speaking again. Spike struggled to keep his demon under control as she continued.

“Xander it wouldn’t go wrong. We have the books, Tara and I are good enough. We can do this.”

“Will, it’s just wrong. You’ve got to leave her to rest.”

“But Xan, what if she isn’t resting? She was killed by a hell god, she could have gone to any of the hell dimensions. We have to try.”

“No. There are so many dimensions; you have no idea where she went. You have no idea what it would do to her if you tried to bring her back. What if you get it wrong?”

“Xander, I’m good at this stuff. I know I can do it.”

“Will, I know you’re good. But this is different. This is risking a friend.”

“Not if we do it right, and I can.”
“I don’t want anything to do with this. Leave her be, Will.”

“I can’t Xan, not if I can help her.”

“But you don’t know that she needs help.”

“I have to try.”

“You won’t have me helping you.”

“But we need you. Two isn’t enough.”

“I won’t be involved in this.”

“Xander, please.”

There were heavy footsteps and Giles’ displeased voice carried through to the room. “A very short stock take, someone has been helping themselves to the ingredients. And while it saves me counting, it does tend to eat into the profits.”

Spike turned to Dawn. “Come on, Niblet. Time to go home, I think.” He held the door for her and ushered her out to the shop.

Letting the door slam loudly behind him, Spike saw Xander and the girls jump. His internal battle began again when he caught Willow’s eye. Spike let the gold flash in
his eyes, and he was rewarded with a frightened look from the witch.

Under the guise of putting his empty brandy glass down on the table, Spike leaned over very close to Willow’s ear and whispered. “I heard you, Red. I will not let you do this.”

The relief that rolled off Xander was almost palpable and Spike easily picked up on it. The demon reared again in response to that, and Spike battled to keep a tight rein.

Willow slid away from him, across the bench seat and grabbed at Tara’s hand. “I know what I’m doing. It’s none of your business,” she whispered back.

Spike let out a low growl that he knew no one would hear but the three sitting at the table. He stood back and glanced at the texts she had open on the table, speaking loud enough for all to hear. “You’ll be wanting to put those books back in the restricted section now, Red. Then the Niblet needs to go home, yeah?”

Giles ears pricked up at that. “Willow, you have restricted texts out while Dawn is here? I must say, that is very irresponsible of you.”

Spike felt the faintest of charges ripple through the air and Willow glared at him while speaking to Giles. “I’ll put
them back before I leave. Don’t worry, Dawnie knows not to touch them.”

“Yes, well, I might have said the same of you, but it seems I would have been mistaken.”

“I was, um, just looking at the pictures, I wasn’t really reading it.”

“That may well be, Willow. However, those books are restricted for a reason and I doubt that even you are ready for the power they contain. Please return them immediately.”

Willow collected her bag and the books from the table, and she and Tara climbed the rolling staircase to the upper level. Spike turned his back on them and smiled at Dawn. “Got all your gear Niblet? Looks like the witches are ready to leave.”

“Yep. All packed.” Dawn swung her small backpack. “Hey, it must be time for another boy’s night in, don’t you think?”

“Not tonight, pet. Maybe next weekend, yeah?”

“Okay,” she said, happily. “Xander?”
“Sure, Dawnie. Next weekend would be great. You start thinking about the movie.” Xander hugged her and walked her to the door.

Willow and Tara said their goodbyes and Spike watched them all leave. Not before time. Just looking at Red, thinking about what she had planned, and the hurt she was causing Xander, had made his demon furious, and Spike was having difficulty keeping it in check.

The stupid bints wanted to bring back the slayer. Wards and simple protections aside, Spike had a long-standing distrust of magic, and a newer, but no less powerful, distrust of Willow’s ability. This was not easy magic. This was magic with consequences, magic with the potential for horrific outcomes. Spike knew that if something went wrong they would all look to him to deal with the result.

With a curt nod to the watcher, Spike spun around and strode out the door, onto the sidewalk. He knew Xander wouldn’t be far behind him. So this was what had been getting to the boy for the last day or two. Spike couldn’t blame him. It was a bloody dangerous and selfish thing the witch wanted to do.

Spike wasn’t surprised that Xander had held this one close to his chest for a while. He wondered if the boy had been tempted to go along with it, even for the briefest
moment. There was no doubt about his feelings now, though. Spike and his demon were right there with him.

Part Nine

Spike waited on the sidewalk. Inside, he could hear Xander helping Giles tidy and lock up. While he waited, Spike smoked. His cigarettes were down to the butt in no time, and his boots thudded as he paced back and forth in front of the shop.

By the time Xander came out with Giles, there was nearly half a pack’s worth of butts scattered across the ground.

“Spike, you’re still here. Did you need something?” Giles asked.

“No.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Need to talk to the boy.”

“Xander, will you be alright here if I leave?”
“Bloody hell, Watcher. What can I do to him?”

“I’m fine thanks Giles. There’s nothing for you to worry about. We just need to sort out some details about movie night with Dawn.”

“As you say then.” Giles looked doubtfully at both of them, but left with a vague wave.

As soon as Giles’ car had disappeared from view, Spike turned to Xander. “What the bloody hell is that stupid bint thinking? Self centred, egotistical bitch has no idea what she’s messing with.”

Xander gave a heavy sigh and a tight smile. “So, I was right. You don’t agree with her plan.”

“No! Fuck, no. Do you know how many things could go wrong? What she could bring back?”

“So it’s not as simple as she says?”

Spike shook his head in disgust. “Not even close.”

Xander nodded and looked at Spike with some hesitation. “Um, can we go somewhere else and talk about this? You want to get a drink?”
“Best not go to the bar; you never know who might be listening. Wouldn’t do for word to get out about her, yeah?”

“True. Okay then, where?”

“My place? We’ll have to stop at the liquor store on the way; I’m all out of refreshments, and I’m sure as hell gonna need them.”

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Xander drove them back, stopping at the store while Spike ran in for supplies.

“I don’t hear any alarms. You paid for all that?” he asked, when Spike put two heavy bags in the back seat.

“Course I bloody bought it. You think I’m gonna hold up a liquor store if I can’t even slap the clerk’s face when he pulls a gun on me?”

“I, um, I just didn’t-. The DVD player, and the movies-. Sorry, I just thought-. “

Spike sighed. “The kid behind the counter of blockbuster is a lot less jumpy than the guy in the liquor store. Different story altogether.”

“Oh. Um, the money, is it-.”
“Liberated it from demons before I killed them. Some of them are well cashed up, keeps me going for a while.”

“You don’t take it from humans?”

Spike stared at him incredulously. “How? I pick the one that wants to fight back, and I’m screwed, thanks to the Initiative bastards.”

Xander stared straight ahead and drove. Spike watched the expressions flitting over his face and the muscles clenching in his jaw. Something about that had pissed him off good and proper.

“Relax. I’m not going to hurt humans. It’s not worth the soddin’ pain.”

“No, it’s not that. How could those scientists-.” He shook his head. “Never mind, we’re here anyway. You want to grab those bags?” Xander climbed out without another word.

Spike just sat and stared after him as Xander got out of the car. That young man was full of surprises. Spike sighed. Judging by the speedy exit, Xander wasn’t prepared to elaborate, so Spike got his things and headed for the gates. Xander took one bag and they walked quickly and silently back to the crypt.
Inside, Xander hovered while Spike unpacked the bags—two bottles of Jack, two of Coke and a six-pack. There was also a selection of junk food. Spike pushed that bag towards Xander.

“Here you go. Crap food. You like this stuff right?”

Xander looked inside the bag. “You eat this?”

“No. I throw the popcorn, you eat the rest. Unless I got it wrong. Thought you liked that rubbish.”

“I do.” Xander stared at him, while tipping the contents of the bag out. “You bought all this for me?”

“Settle down. One of us would have been buying wings at the bar, this isn’t any different. Also, it’s precautionary. If you get stuck into my Jack again, then there’s something padding that stomach of yours so you won’t be so likely to throw up on my floor.”

“Either that, or I’ll throw up your whiskey and the food. Good plan.”

“Shit. Stick to your beer and coke, then we’ll be fine.”

“Believe me, your whiskey is really not at the top of my list of things to put in my body. Never again.” Xander took the beer that Spike handed him and sat in one of
the recliners. “Thanks for the food, that’s really-. I’ll eat something later, though. Not really hungry at the moment.”

Spike settled into the other chair. “So how long have you been dwelling on that little gem?”

“Willow?”

Spike nodded sharply.

“She told me on Wednesday. She came to my place after work; just her, not Tara.”

“And tell me. How did Red broach this with you?”

“God, she was so excited. More happy than I’ve seen her in a long time. I thought it was going to be something great. And you know, for a split second, it was. I mean who wouldn’t want her back? Okay, there’s any number of demons and maybe yours too, but her friends? Her family?”

“My demon would rather she stays were she is, so would I.” Spike pointed his drink towards Xander. “I wondered if you’d wanted it.”

Xander looked abashed. “Yeah, I’ll admit I did. But I think I kinda got how serious it all would be, when Willow
explained more. I just let her talk, but the more she said, the more I could see the holes in it.”

“Its big league magic she’s planning. I don’t know if she’s up to it.”

“I don’t think she is, but I can’t convince her of that. She’s getting so aggressive about it. She’s been calling me, she came to the site on Thursday.” Xander ran his hands through his hair. “I don’t know what to do. I’ve told her no, but she just keeps pushing.”

“That’s why you wanted me to be there tonight? To hear what she’s cooking up?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry to drag you into it; I just don’t know how to deal with this.”

“Don’t worry about it. Look, she says she can’t do it with just the both of them; they need at least one more. She won’t ask the Niblet and she wouldn’t dare ask me or the watcher. Now I don’t know a lot, but I’d say for that kind of magic, she’ll need people who were close to the slayer, both proximity and some kind of relationship, friends probably.”

Xander looked hopefully at him. “So, you really think she can’t do it then?”
Spike leaned forward and considered that. “Don’t quote me on it, but I’d think not. Course, she could well’ve tweaked the bloody mojo, she could even have found a new spell or made a composite of other ones. I just don’t know.”

“Should we tell Giles?”

Spike sat back and finished his drink while he thought about that. He was aware of Xander’s eyes on him. Big changes. Time was, the boy wouldn’t have sat so still or so quiet for such a long time. Not any more. Spike met his eyes and was not surprised to see the boy start and look away.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to tell the watcher, right now.”

“Why?”

“Think about it. How have you been feeling? It’s been hard, yeah? It’ll hit the watcher hard, too. He’s probably already blaming himself for losing his slayer, never mind that she was like a daughter. How do you think he’ll take that news?”

“Okay, but he could make sure she can’t get the things she needs. At least the things from his store.”
“Harris, if I had found out about this before you did, you can bet your bottom dollar that I would have made damn sure you and the Bit and the watcher never found out. It’s not right. People are still mourning, it’s just not right.”

Xander opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it again. He tried one more time, then appeared to give up and just nodded.

“And we can go back to that store tomorrow and make sure she can’t get the books she needs again. Like I said, I don’t think she can do this without you, but just in case, yeah?”

“We’re gonna steal the books?”

“Those and some ingredients. I know the books she was using, we can bring those here, hide them downstairs in the tunnels.”

“Will they be safe?”

“Witches warded my place up didn’t they?”

Xander snorted. “Yeah, I guess they did.”
“More fool them.” Spike raised his drink to Xander. “Besides, they aren’t to know the watcher didn’t pack those books away after he saw them out tonight.”

“And if he notices them missing?”

“Doubt it. He’s got his hands full managing the fucking bot and the store, now your demon bint’s gone. He has enough to keep himself occupied.”

“Spike, I hate this. She’s my best friend and I’m sitting here plotting against her.”

“She’s not my friend. And what she wants to do is a disgrace. You think the slayer would want this? Not knowing what condition she might come back in? She might be perfectly fine, but there’s just as big a chance that she’ll come back empty, twisted, feral. Would she want Dawn, or any of you, exposed to that?”

“God, no. But Willow won’t listen to that.”

“I know. Because if that happens, she’ll leave it up to someone else to deal with. Namely me.”

“Could you?”

“For y-, ah, you lot, I would. But I’d probably have to let the demon do it. No matter what I thought of the slayer
myself, the demon hates her. I had a hard time holding it down when I heard what the witch wanted to do.”

Xander sat on the edge of his seat and stared hard at Spike. It was disconcerting being under such intense scrutiny, but Spike held steady and let the boy do whatever it was that he was doing. Once upon a time, he would have been offended or even challenged by such an appraisal, but now, he just sat, met the dark brown, probing eyes and let it happen.

Eventually, Xander blinked and smiled a small apology. “Sorry, I just-. I was wondering what its like in there.” He looked down and blushed. “I mean, I don’t understand when you talk about the demon and then about you. Are there two of you in there?”

Spike felt the demon stir again. The past few weeks, in small increments, Xander had been indicating that he’d been giving some degree of thought to the demon as separate from Spike himself. No one had done that. Angelus had been all about the demons. Dru, well, dearest Dru didn’t know which way was up even on a good day.

Certainly none of the slayer’s troops had given it a moment’s thought; just the boy. And that got his demon’s attention.
It was Xander’s turn to fidget under the searching gaze. “Sorry, it’s not my business. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s alright. I don’t mind. I suppose I was just wondering why you were asking, when no one else gives two hoots.”

“You talk about what the demon feels, like sometimes it’s separate from you, I thought you were the same. I just was interested is all. Sorry-.”

“Don’t be bloody sorry for asking things. I said it was okay. Nothing wrong with questions is there? If I don’t want to answer you, then I’ll tell you to sod off won’t I?”

Xander smiled. “I have no doubt.”

“Right then. You know that goody two shoes, wee green thing? With the hat and the umbrella and the bloody irritating morals? A cockroach or some such?”

Xander’s mouth dropped open. “Are you talking about Jiminy Cricket?”

“Yeah, that thing.”

“It’s a cricket, not a cockroach.”

“Easy mistake to make. Annoying little shit, I would love to squash that under my boot.”
“Sorry, but are you saying your demon is a green cricket?”

“Don’t be daft. Now, imagine having one of those-.”

“Minus the clothes and accessories and the soundtrack.”

“Do you want to know, or shall I boot you out the door for the local vamps to eat?” Spike gave him a withering look, working extremely hard not to smile, and Xander raised his hands in apology.

Spike got out of his seat and wandered around, trying to think of a way to explain it. He stopped and faced Xander. “Okay, it’s like this. That green shit was the boy’s conscience yeah? Always in his ear and telling him not to have any fun.”

“Well, that’s one way of looking at it, I guess.”

“Right. So the demon is like that. It’s that voice inside that keeps whispering, but it has some control as well. The green bloke, he could only tell the kid what to do, couldn’t actually make him do it. But then, what if he had hold of the kid’s strings?”

“So the demon makes you do things you don’t want?”
“It could, if I didn’t have hold of my own strings.” Spike sat again, had a drink and continued. “It’s like a conscience with no morals, no principles and no boundaries. It wants what it wants, and usually that’s blood and chaos. Other times it fixes on things and tries to take hold of the strings. If I’m not strong enough, or too drunk, or angry, it gets a good hold. Usually I can tune it out, but sometimes, on the rare occasion, it wants something so badly I have to let it go.”

“Like today?”

“Like today. It knows what the witch wants to do. It hates the slayer and it wants blood. I have a tight hold at the moment, but the witch doesn’t know how close she came.”

“But the chip-.”

“The demon doesn’t care. Yeah, it hurts, but that’s a consequence. It’s not interested in consequences, just gratification of a sort.”

“So when you say the demon feels something, it is separate from you. There are two of you.”

“I’m the demon and the demon is me. So I suppose we’re just parts of a whole, a little more polarised than most. I don’t even notice it most of the time, when I’m happy,
and it’s not on edge, we just exist together. But, you know the times when your little green bastard is telling you something and you ignore it and do the opposite?”

Xander gave a soft laugh. “Oh, yeah. Had plenty of those times.”

“Similar. Just magnified, and my green bastard has a bit more control and influence than yours. It’s like an urge you can’t ignore.”

“How do you rein it back in when you need to?”

“I let it out. I hunt. It needs the violence and destruction for balance. I’ve found that’s the best way to keep it sated and manageable long term. All simple as that.”

Xander smiled. “I guess that was kind of a bit more personal information than I expected.”

Spike cocked his head and considered Xander. It certainly had been more than he’d ever shared with anyone else before. “Yeah. Yeah, it was. Just bear in mind, information is a powerful thing. You never know when you can use it.”

Xander frowned and shook his head. “What do you mean?”
Spike sighed. “Fucked if I know. I need to get out. You want to grab an axe and tag along?”

“Yeah, sure. I think we have a plan as far as Willow goes. There’s maybe nothing she can do now anyway. But I wouldn’t mind a few rounds with something new and stupid, or old and semi-incapacitated.”

Spike snorted. “I’ll see what I can do. Heads up, yeah? In case my green bastard gets the better of me.”

They finished their drinks, grabbed coats and weapons and headed outside. The boy could do with some stress relief, and Spike knew a good fight would do that for him. And, after keeping a hold of his demon most of the evening, Spike knew he needed to let go as well. Judging by his demon’s reactions earlier, Spike knew Xander would be relatively safe, even if he did lose control.

**Part Ten**

Spike had been right. He’d needed to let the demon loose for a short time, but he knew Xander would be okay. It wasn’t just the fact that it didn’t want to hurt him, but that Harris seemed to have a healthy respect for the nature of the demon, and stayed well back when Spike was going all out.
Spike hadn’t wanted to have to rein it in too much, he was craving the fight, needing the freedom and near-loss of control. After discovering Willow’s intentions, it was better to let the demon take out its rage and frustration on something undead, than on one of the boy’s nearest and dearest. Even if she was pushing her luck.

So they’d wandered, talked and seen to a few vampires and one demon. One of the vampires had made the mistake of bypassing Spike and aiming for Xander. Spike enjoyed toying with that one a bit longer than the others. Taunting and teasing it mercilessly, before taking its head off. Harris had been safely and willingly sidelined for most of the patrol. When the action had died down, they’d gone back to the crypt to clean off the dust and demon residue and share a beer.

“You’re getting better at this, you know?” Spike said, handing Xander a damp towel and a drink.

“What? Drinking? Cause that’s not high on my list of personal improvements.”

“No, git. Fighting. I mean, I might have softened that last one up for you, but you’ve nothing to be ashamed of there. She’d be right proud of what you can do now.”
Spike turned away and pretended he hadn’t noticed when the boy blushed and swallowed hard. Spike didn’t think he would be ready to deal with tears just yet, no matter how close to friends he knew they were. He flipped the television on, tossed the remote to Xander, then busied himself on the other side of the room with wiping off the remains of the demon and finding a clean shirt.

When he wandered back to pick up his beer, he caught a glimpse of Xander’s head turning quickly back to the television. By the time he sat in the opposite recliner, the boy was casually sipping his beer and staring fixedly at the late movie.

Xander briefly glanced over when Spike tipped his seat back and lit a cigarette. Spike didn’t fail to notice the boy wouldn’t meet his eyes. Some odd behaviour from him lately, but it was to be expected, given the circumstances and all. Death of a friend, departure of the girlfriend, not-friends with the nemesis, all of that had to have some kind of impact and Spike was not too concerned about overlooking the occasional quirk.

Xander muted the television and turned to Spike. “I, um, I was thinking. If, you know, if we wait until tomorrow, then maybe Willow and Tara will be there, definitely
Giles. How do we get the books out? It would look a bit suspicious taking a bag, seeing as I never carry one.”

“Yeah, you might have a point.” Spike sat forward on the edge of his seat and smirked. “How do you feel about a bit of a late night sortie?”

“Tonight?”

He nodded. “No time like the present.”

“But the locks and wards on the shop-, we’ll never get in.”

Spike smiled knowingly and stood up, downing the last of his beer. “Leave that up to me, yeah? Let’s get it done.”

The indecision on Xander’s face was clear. “I don’t know that I feel right about breaking in to Giles’ shop.”

“Right. Then you’ve got no worries, have you? We aren’t breaking into the bloody place.”

Xander looked at him questioningly, but Spike just opened the door and ushered him out with a grin.

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Ten minutes later, Xander was staring open-mouthed as Spike pulled a set of keys from his pocket and unlocked the door of the Magic Box.

“Do I even want to know where you got those?”

Spike just snorted in amusement. “You know every time you ask something like that, the answer is invariably no.”

“Please just tell me you didn’t pick Giles pockets tonight.”

“I didn’t pick the watcher’s pockets tonight.”

Xander sighed. “How long?”

Spike shrugged. “I don’t rightly know; maybe a few months. Long enough to help myself to a few bits and bobs from around the place, get some blood out of the watcher’s fridge when I’d run out. I didn’t think he’d mind me avoiding starvation, seeing as I was helping you lot out and all. Can’t do that if I’m dust-dead.” Spike glanced at Xander as he opened the door, just catching the tiniest of frowns on the boy’s face. “Oh don’t get your knickers in a twist over this. I’ve not taken any of his money, just a few herbs, the occasional candle and some blood that was mine anyway. No harm done.”
Xander looked dubious, but nodded. “Yeah, okay then. I suppose if Giles hasn’t noticed, then it can’t be too much of an issue.”

“Oh the watcher’s noticed often enough, he just doesn’t know what it is he’s noticing. For him, there’s a little less brandy in the bottle than he thought, or maybe Red helped herself to a good lot of burba weed, or someone didn’t clean up the training room after a session with the weights and bag. The watcher is a busy man. He’s still a sad man. So much so that he doesn’t worry about incidentals.”

“No one is looking after him,” Xander said with some regret. “We just thought he was the adult and he would be okay.”

Spike shook his head. “He’ll be fine. He’s got that uniquely British gene that means he probably won’t let you try to help him through it. Just let him be. He’s doing alright.”

“How do you know all this? You don’t even like us, but you know so much.”

“Easy when no one will talk to you. Then you can just observe, listen, build up a bit of a picture. Simple thing when nobody really cares to notice what you’re doing.”
“We’ve treated you pretty badly haven’t we?” Xander asked. Spike was surprised and somewhat pleased to hear the tinge of regret.

“No.” Spike scoffed. “You treated me like a vampire who tried to kill you all numerous times. And, honestly? It doesn’t bother me a great deal what most of the people here think.”

“Most? Not all?”

“Most.”

The keys in Spike’s hand jingled as he put them back in his pocket, distracting Xander.

“So, now you have those, you just come in and help yourself when you please?”

“Haven’t been here in a fair while. Haven’t needed to.”

“So you don’t just break in for fun? Just to annoy Giles?”

“Ah, no. I think I’m past the flaming bag on the doorstep and short-sheeting the bed, type of fun, don’t you?” Spike sneered at him. “Besides, it’s not breaking in if I have my own keys is it?”

“And you’re just assuming here that I’m not gonna tell Giles you copied a set of his keys?”
Spike stopped, tilted his head and stared at Xander thoughtfully. “You’d do that?” he said, frowning. “I thought we were past that.”

“I-, no-, I-.” Xander fidgeted uncomfortably while he searched for the words. “No, I just meant that in a ‘wow, you trust me enough to tell me this’ kinda way. I didn’t mean I would run off and tell him. I wouldn’t do that. Sorry, it came out wrong.”

“Right.” Accepting Xander at his word, and not needing anything further, Spike stuffed the keys into his pocket and took a flashlight from behind the counter, pressing it into Xander’s hand.

“Come on then, let’s get these books.” He was halfway up the stairs to the restricted area when he heard Xander’s voice. It held a note of worry, a very uncertain tone.

“Spike?”

He stopped and turned around on the stairs. Xander was still over near the counter, twisting the flashlight in his hands. “What?”

“I meant it. I won’t tell Giles you have the keys.”

“I know that, you told me.”
“So we’re, um, okay?” Xander waved a hand vaguely in the air between them and even in the dark, Spike could see how self-conscious he was.

Spike rolled his eyes, knowing Xander couldn’t see him. *Humans. Always needing it all spelled out.* “Yeah. Books then?” Spike turned away again and stepped up onto the top floor. There was an audible sigh of relief from behind him.

“Okay, books.” Xander switched on the light and shone it on the stairs, following Spike up.

The top section was crowded with stock. Old dusty boxes of bad ideas that hadn’t sold, piles of outdated books and broken furniture awaiting repairs. Rows of shelving containing all kinds of books blocked any light that might come in from the street. Spike had no trouble finding his way around, but Xander kept the light on the floor in front of him, dodging the piles.

“Geez, Giles really needs to get up here and bust some dust.”

“I don’t think this is one of his priorities at the moment.”

“So where’re the books?”
“Back corner. Doesn’t make any sense to me. You put them back here, you’re asking for trouble. Put them out in the open instead. Right where you can see who’s looking at the bloody things.”

Xander shone the light around and into the far corner. “Um, Spike, do you see that?”

Spike followed the beam. “Bloody hell.”

Whereas all the other bookshelves were tightly packed, the corner shelf that held the restricted volumes had a large empty space in the middle. When they got closer and shone the light, it was clear that the books Willow had ‘returned’ were gone.

“She took the books didn’t she?” Xander said.

“Yeah, it looks like she did. Must have stuck them in her bag when she and the little woman came up here.”

“So what do we do now? Go get them off her?”

“You reckon she’s just leaving those lying around the house? Maybe on the nightstand? No, I don’t think we’ll see those again till she’s done. Between the two of them, they could mojo up any number of hiding places so as we’d never see them.”
“I could check, though. Next time I’m over there.”

“Could do that. You don’t want to get on her bad side, though. You don’t know what kind of protections they’d have on their room. She could well know you’ve been in there.”

“So we just let her keep them? Bring Buffy back?”

“Look, I can’t do anything physical to restrain her. And she’s got the books. But don’t forget, it’s likely she still needs at least one more person before she can do it. You keep holding out on her, she just won’t be able to get it done.”

Xander sat down heavily on a wooden box and dropped his head into his hands. “What are we doing? This is Willow.”

Spike lit a cigarette and leaned back against a shelf. “You’re doing this as much to help her as to stop her. Doing what you lot do and saving her from herself.”

“I don’t want to be dealing with this, you know? I mean, I finally felt like things might be getting back to normal, I just want to get my life on track. But now it feels like I’m losing control of it all again.”
“You can’t control everything. Some of these things, you need to ride them out and find the solution along the way. Now, you say she only just came up with the idea this week, yeah?”

Xander rubbed his hands over his face, then sat up and faced Spike. “She did. Then she spoke to me the next day.”

“Good. Now, if I’m right, then this is bloody complex mojo. It’s not a matter of lighting a candle and setting fire to the herbs. She’s going to need a good long while to get the bits and pieces together. So that gives us time to work out if we can do anything about it. Time for you to appeal to her more reasonable side.”

“I don’t think there is a reasonable side to this. Not for her anyway, she seems pretty set on it.”

“Then, Harris, you are going to have to be your usual stubborn self and hold your ground. Don’t let her sway you, and you keep at her as well. I’ll back you up any time you need. We just can’t let the silly bint do this.”

And god help her if she does go ahead and screws it up. Spike thought. I don’t know if I’ll be able to hold back, chipped or not.
Part Eleven

The next Friday, as soon as Spike walked into the bar, he knew it hadn’t been a good week for Xander. The boy sat at the back, at the usual table, slouched over and sifting his fingers though the bowl of nuts. It was an introspective, guarded position he’d not seen for many weeks. Something had set him off. There was a warning rumble from the demon to fix it, and Spike thought back to the other nights they’d been together that week.

The usual mid-week night out had gone okay. It had been quiet, just a few drinks, a quick patrol- no movies. The witches hadn’t turned up to the meeting at the Magic Box the night after, having cited Tara’s headache. Seeing as the Hellmouth saw fit of late not to throw a curve ball, and the bot had things under control, Spike and Xander had gone back to the crypt for a night in with a drink and a box set. Spike recalled Xander had been quiet that night too, but he’d put it down to a hard day at work.
Maybe there had been more and the boy was just keeping it close to his chest.

Buying a round of drinks, Spike made his way to the back, noting that Xander didn’t even look up when he sat down and pushed a drink across the table.

“Harris?” Spike ventured, tapping on the table.

Xander’s head jerked up, and Spike could see the stress in the tight lines of his face and the heavy, tired eyes. He immediately took up his glass and stared into its depths. “Hey.”

Spike frowned. He’d thought this was long past. “Did I miss something here?”

Xander ran his fingers over the condensation on the glass in front of him. “Bad week.” He picked it up and finished half the contents in one swallow.

“Anything I can do?”

“Doubt it.” Xander sighed heavily and sat back, resting against the wall behind him. “I don’t know. Willow’s been calling. She thinks that if she can keep me in the loop on what she’s doing, then I’ll change my mind.”
Spike kept his voice steady, trying to make sure none of the worry he felt came through. “And is that working? You having second thoughts about doing this?”

“It would make things easier. I’ve thought about it, I won’t lie to you. If I just agreed to help her, she’d leave me alone now and I wouldn’t have to worry until it was time to actually to it.”

“Sounds like a but.”

“Yeah. I can’t do it. I can’t help her do this just to make my life easier.” Xander finally leaned forward and squarely met Spike’s eyes. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I trust you more on this than I do Willow.”

Inside, Spike felt his demon surge. It was not displeased. “Right. And why would that be?”

“She’s getting more powerful. But it’s still all new to her. You’ve been around so long, that even though you hate magic-.”

“I still know a thing or two about it.”

“Yeah. You’d have to know more about it than her. And you loved Buffy, right? If this was risk-free, wouldn’t you just be letting Willow get on with it?”
“That’s all past tense and conjecture. I was-, well let’s say, deluded. A slayer and vampire? That’s just bloody asking for trouble. And there is no chance, in any number of hells, that this little plan of hers is risk-free. It’s magic; magic has consequences. Magic of this size is going to get fucking ugly. Never mind what could happen to the slayer if Red screws it up. Or how it affects Niblet and the watcher, if they see the results. I can’t think of a single reason to let her do it.”

“Even if she didn’t mess it up?”

“Even if.”

“So you won’t change your mind? You don’t want Buffy back?”

Spike considered Xander’s words. It sounded innocent enough. But that might be what had made him stop and think. Too casual. There was something more there, it was evident in the guarded tone and the way he’d dropped his eyes back down to his glass. It seemed Xander’s question was more for reassurance than clarification.

“That’s not as easy to answer as you think. No, of course I won’t change my mind. But do I want the slayer back? Well that depends on if we’re dealing with hypotheticals.
The demon says no, no matter what. But, do I wish she’d not met her end like that and was still here for her little sis? Yeah, course I do. Do I want her back because I miss her and want a chance with her? No. That shite’s over with. Do I want the witch to fuck around with that kind of power and resurrect someone who had a hard life and might finally be at peace? I can’t think of a stronger way to say no.”

“Me either.” Xander tipped his glass towards Spike. “Thanks. I’m glad I have someone else to toss this around with.”

“So tell me, what’s got you so miserable this week? What’s Red been saying?”

Xander sighed. “She’s called me every day, at home or at work. She tells me how they’ve found the spell they need and it’s all going to work, then the next day she tells me how she knows exactly how to do it and how it won’t go wrong. Every day she’s pleading with me, begging. God, it’s so hard to keep saying no. It’s Will, you know?”

“She’s playing on that. Thinking she can push and push and you’ll give in, because she’s your mate. If you don’t want this to happen, you’ll tune out all that manipulating and stand up to her; or at the very least, just ignore it.”
“I’m trying, but she’s so persistent.” Xander fiddled with his glass while he thought. “She knows that I know she has the books.”

Spike raised an eyebrow in interest. “That right? And how did that happen?”

“I told her I saw the empty shelf when we were there on Wednesday. I asked her to bring them back, to let it all go.”

“And how did that sit with her?”

Xander shook his head. “She said she’s nearly finished with the books and she’s taking them back next week. Apparently she’s copied what she needs.”

“Right, then. So even if we get them back, it’s a bit bloody late?”

“Looks that way.”

Spike nodded. “So we just have to stick with the only plan we have. She wouldn’t be hounding you if she didn’t need you, so I must have been right. She hasn’t found a way around that part. She still needs another person.” Spike leaned forward and made sure he had Xander’s attention. “You don’t let her sway you. You know this is
wrong, just hold out. If it gets too much, you come to me
before you do anything, yeah?”

“I won’t give in to her, Spike. I just want her to leave me
alone, you know? She won’t take no for an answer on
this.”

“Cause she needs you. She’s limited in how this thing can
play out. That kind of magic, she can’t just go and get any
old person to help her out.”

Spike saw the instant the thought hit Xander and the
horror appeared on his face. “God, I hope she doesn’t get
desperate and ask Dawn.”

“Then you’d best get in a truck load of Tylenol, because if
she does, then even this chip won’t stop me doing her
some damage. The demon will see to that.”

Spike had expected some kind of protest or mild
reprimand, but Xander merely nodded his agreement
with a grim expression.

“Dawn’s had a hard enough time, without adding this to
it. Do you think she’d go to Giles?”

“Not a chance. Too many questions, too much of a risk
he might get the council involved. I don’t know what he
personally could do to stop her, but he’d give it his best.”
“It’s so hard to believe we’re saying all this. Do you think she’s out of control?”

“Maybe; if not, she’s bloody close to it. I think she’s a girl who’s lost her friend and thinks she’s found a way out of the pain. She’s got a bit of power and she’s looking for more. But if she isn’t careful it could run away with her.”

“It’s this place isn’t it?” Xander said with disgust. “It’s the Hellmouth. It brings out the worst in people.”

“It can do,” Spike agreed. “But it brings out the best too. You don’t know what you’re capable of until you’re faced with the badness of it all. That the test ain’t it? How you hold up under pressure, how you deal with it.”

Xander snorted. “I don’t think I’m dealing with it so well.”

“Don’t doubt yourself, Harris. You’re still here fighting the fight aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess; I don’t know why. Buffy’s gone. Anya’s gone. My parents might as well be gone, for all the use they are. Why am I still here, letting this place kick me around?”

“The girl,” Spike said. And that was it. That was why they were both still here. Spike had no allegiance to anyone else. He was free to roam the world at his leisure. The
only reason he was still in this town was the girl and the promise he’d once made to keep her safe.

Xander sagged in his seat. “My boss keeps asking me to take some out of town contracting jobs. I don’t want to, but even if I did, I can’t. Dawnie needs us doesn’t she?”

Spike was surprised by the discontent he felt at Xander’s mention of leaving, even though it was to say he wouldn’t. Pushing that aside, he nodded, knowing that at this moment, the boy was feeling the obligation like a weight around his neck. “That she does. Especially if the witch goes off the rails.”

“You think she will?” he asked.

“Bloody good chance,” Spike told him with all honesty. “I hope not though. I’ve seen it before, it can get bad.”

“What can we do?”

“Don’t know. Not really something I’ve had much experience with. Normally I’d let it all go and just sit back and enjoy the chaos.” And he would have done the same thing this time too, if it hadn’t been people close to him who would be affected. The demon was urging him to let it play out, but at the same time it was making noises about sparing Xander and the girl. Spike wasn’t as indecisive.
“You think maybe Tara will be able to keep Willow on an even keel?” Xander asked with a hopeful tone.

“She may do. But she’s involved with this plan of Red’s isn’t she? Don’t know what use she’ll be.”

“I wonder if she really wants to do this spell, or if she’s just worried that she’ll lose Willow if she refuses.”

“No saying, is there? Not like she’d going flitting about telling everyone she’s under the thumb.”

“Maybe we should talk to her? See if we can stop this going ahead.”

“Could be worth a shot. But unless there’s trouble in paradise that you don’t know about, I’d say she’s backing up her girl. No harm trying though.”

“Tomorrow then? It’s movie night with Dawn. You still going?”

“Bloody hell.” Spike sighed. “More thick-headed action heroes, yeah?”

Xander smiled then. She thinks they’re guy movies, and we’re guys so-."

“Fair enough then. Fuck. The things I do for her.”
Xander stood up and took out his wallet, clapping Spike on the shoulder. “You and me both, pal.”

Spike resisted the urge to glance at Xander’s hand, but the surprise must have shown on his face. Xander pulled his hand away quickly and blushed beet red. Spike could hear his heart thudding. “I’ll go get the next round,” he mumbled, rushing off to the bar.

Spike watched him go and smiled to himself. Not friends. Sure. He could still feel the warmth and weight of that hand on his shoulder and was enjoying the contented hum from his demon, when Xander returned with the drinks. Two beers. Interesting.

Xander was still looking a little uncomfortable, embarrassed even. Spike tried to diffuse the situation, and get them back to the easy conversation they’d had a moment ago. “Is this going to be one of those nights I have to pour your sorry arse home again?”

“No. Not going there. Not unless I need another round of emergency treatment at your place.”

“Don’t know, you’re a bit of a lightweight,” he smirked. “You have two beers and we patrol, you may be in need of a few stitches.”
Xander visibly relaxed and smiled into his beer. Spike was satisfied.

Part Twelve

Xander collected Spike from the cemetery gates just minutes after sundown. The moment Spike opened the door, the scent of freshly washed and cologned human met his nose. Not bad. Certainly beat the smell of the rich earth and vague aroma of decomposition in the cemetery.

“Thanks for coming with me. The way Willow’s been this week, I really didn’t want to spend any time alone with her and Tara.”

“Saved me the walk didn’t you?” Spike said, as he sat and strapped himself in. “You ready for this?”

“For Willow? I think so.”

“No, it’s bigger than that. You ready for the girl?”
Xander cracked a smile. “I think I can handle it. How bad can it be?”

“You bloody jinxed us.” Spike stared daggers at Xander, and wondered how badly the girl would take it if he just turned tail and ran. “Jackie fucking Chan.”

Dawn, who had been waiting on the doorstep when they arrived, ran down the pathway to meet them, a movie case waving in her hand.

“Hey, Dawnie,” Xander said, hugging her tightly.

“Willow said you might be too busy to come, but I told her you wouldn’t stand me up.”

Xander glanced quickly at Spike. “Course I wouldn’t do that. Well, not unless there was a really good episode of Star Trek on TV; then I’d drop you like a hot potato.”

Dawn giggled and turned to hug a scowling Spike. “Oh come on, loosen up, Spike. If you want to be a Scooby, you have to get with the touchy feely.”

“Watch yourself there, Bit. Who the hell said I wanted to be a soddin’ goody two-shoes white hat? I’m evil, remember” Spike grumbled, but let the girl hug him and
gently squeezed her back. He closed his eyes for the briefest moment, as he breathed in the scent of fruit and candy and young human that mixed deliciously with the heavy earth smell of an early evening outdoors.

Outdoors? “Oi! What were you doing outside in the dark by yourself? You know better than that.”

Dawn’s eyes widened. “Oh! It was only for a few minutes, I knew you’d be here straight after sunset. Besides, Willow and Tara have been busy, it gets boring sitting on my own.”

“Busy are they? Still, no excuse. You don’t go out by yourself, yeah? Anything could happen. There’re all kinds of nasties waiting for you. What say I just let them have at you, eh?”

Dawn pouted and hung her head. “Sorry, Spike. I won’t do it again. I didn’t mean to make you mad. Are you still going to stay? I’d really like it if you stayed.”

Spike marvelled at how women these days learned to use their wiles at so young an age. Surely it hadn’t been like this back in William’s day? He didn’t remember being quite so easily manipulated then. Still, Spike supposed it didn’t really count now; not if you actually let it happen.
“Oh, bloody hell. Course I’m going to stay.” How long could the movie go for? More to the point, how much could he drink while it was playing?

“Great.” Dawn’s face broke into a sunny smile. “So, who wants to order the pizzas? And more importantly, who wants to pay?”

Xander looked seriously at Spike. “Rock, paper, scissors?”

“Sod off. You’re the man with the job.” Spike curled his lip and jerked his head towards the house. “How about we take this inside?”

He didn’t miss the apprehension pass over Xander’s face and disappear just as quickly. Spike knew that once they got past greeting the witches and they’d left for the night, that Xander would relax more and actually enjoy his ‘boy’s night in’. After a hellish week, it would do him good to unwind with the Niblet and forget about his woes.

Spike led the way inside, Xander and Dawn right behind him. All three stopped in the living room, where Tara and Willow were pulling on their coats.

“See? I told you they’d come,” Dawn said, smugly.
“Hey, Xan.” Willow gave Xander a small uncertain smile, but didn’t acknowledge Spike. “That’s great Dawnie. You have fun, we’re going to get some dinner and see a movie, so we’ll be back later.”

“Let me walk you out, yeah?” Spike said.

“Oh. Oh. No, we’ll be fine. The car is right outside. You just stay here with Dawn.”

“No, no,” Dawn shook her head. “See, unless you want him to use his cranky face, you better let him walk you out. I already made the mistake of being outside alone. Humour him,” he added in a stage whisper.

“Yeah, Red. Humour me.” Spike went back to the front door and waited while Willow and Tara said goodnight to Dawn. “You never know what could be out there cooking up some evil plan, yeah?”

Spike caught the scowl Willow shot at him as she and Tara passed through the door. There was a low crackle of energy as she brushed by, and Spike felt it as a light tingle over his skin. *Witch is having trouble managing magic and temper,* Spike thought.

Outside, Willow and Tara tried to hurry to the car and avoid Spike. There was little chance of that; Spike overtook them and blocked the car door with his body.
“Spike get away from the car,” Willow said, trying to push past.

“No, I don’t think so. See, we have a few things to talk about, don’t we?”

“Nothing that’s any of your business.”

“No? Maybe not, but if I make it my business, then you have a problem.”

“Why do you even care?” Willow asked. “If we do this, then you get Buffy back. You can go back to stalking her while she ignores you, or knocks you down.”

Spike worked hard to contain himself. Even the thought of the chip firing was little incentive. “You are bloody stupid. Can you not see how this could go wrong? Are you so arrogant that you aren’t even going to consider how bad this could be?”

“Spike, we know what we’re doing.”

“No you bloody well don’t,” he insisted. “You might know the technicalities of the spell, but you don’t know the consequences. Have you thought about what you could do to her?”
“Yes. We could bring her back from hell. Bring her back to her family. She needs to be here.”

Spike knew he’d been right in his early assessment. The arrogance, the unwavering belief that she was doing the right thing. It was all real, but Spike guessed that it was a cover for how badly she was coping. Spike ignored the pain he could see in her eyes and turned to Tara. “And you? You know more about this than she does. Can’t you see how it could turn out?”

Tara moved closer to Willow, blushing and stammering as she spoke. “I-, I think Willow can do it. Sh-, she’s powerful.”

“That’s how it is then? The pair of you are just going to jump into this with both feet, and bugger the rest of us? You don’t bloody care if you hurt anyone, do you? You don’t care about the watcher, you don’t care about the little Bit. Fuck knows you don’t care about the boy in there.”

Willow’s voice shook as she took a step closer to Spike. There was something new in her face that took away the softness she always had, and left her with a hate-filled façade. “You dare to tell me how I feel about my friends? You’re not a part of this. You never have been. We are
bringing Buffy back. Her family needs her. I need her. You get no say. You can’t stop it.”

“You can’t do it without the boy. He doesn’t want this any more than I do. Without him you have no hope of getting this off the ground.”

“Xander will change his mind. He loves Buffy and Dawn, and he loves me; he’ll help us. He just needs time to get used to the idea.”

“He doesn’t need any bloody time. He needs you to leave him be so he can get on with healing. You stay away from him, witch.”

“Don’t push me Spike. We have more power than you might think. And who are you to tell me to stay away from my friend?”

As it had before, the air around Willow rippled and sparked. It was almost imperceptible, but it was there. As soon as the energy hit Spike, his face slipped, and he was staring at Willow with rage-filled yellow eyes.

Spike moved closer, until there was barely a gap between them. “Maybe I can’t tear you limb from limb. Maybe. I don’t know how I’d fare with the chip if I did that. But you push me far enough, I’m willing to take a chance if it means I can stop this from happening.” Very slowly and
deliberately, Spike took her by the wrist and squeezed,
gritting his teeth against the chip’s warning sparks,
without revealing the pain.

Rather than pulling away, as he’d thought she would,
Willow muttered some words under her breath and her
skin under his hand burned like holy water. Snarling and
growling at her, he snatched his hand away, the sickly
smell of singed flesh lingering in the still night air.

“What have you done to yourself, witch?” he hissed.
“What powers are you playing with?”

Willow held a hand out towards him, and Spike did his
best not to flinch back from it. “I know I can’t take you
on, Spike, even with the chip. But I won’t let you ruin
this. Tara and I can do it. Xander will help us. He has to. I
won’t let you get in the way of it. You can go to Giles if
you like, but that won’t make any difference, he can’t
stop us either.”

“You have no idea what this will bring about, you silly
bint. You might have a few fancy things for show, but
you’ve still got your training wheels on when it comes to
the magic you need for this. You are going to come a
cropper and when you do, I will be there. I will be there
to pick up the pieces of the boy and the Bit, and I will be
there to see that you get yours.”
Behind them, the door to the house opened and Dawn was on the porch peering out into the dark. “Spike? Are you coming back? The pizzas will be here soon.”

Spike stepped back from Willow and let her at the car door. “This isn’t over yet, Red.”

“I think it is, Spike. This is between me and my friends. You’re nobody’s friend. You can’t do a thing.”

The witches got into their car and drove away while Spike stood on the sidewalk calming himself enough to go back inside with Dawn. His hand burned, but he could feel it beginning to heal around the edges.

“Spike?”

“Yeah, Niblet. Coming in a minute. Just let me have a smoke first, alright?”

“But then you’ll smell funny when you come back in.”

Xander’s voice carried across the front yard. “It’s not such a bad smell, Dawnie. Why don’t you go get the movie and some drinks organised, I’ll see what Spike’s up to, okay?”

Spike lit his cigarette and leaned against a tree trunk, letting his face slip back again. His now-blue eyes focused
on the red ember glowing near his lips. He glanced up as Xander approached and stopped beside him, leaning his shoulder against the tree. “What happened?”

“Bloody witch is so far up her own arse over this thing.”

“She wouldn’t listen?”

Spike leaned back and felt the rough ridges of the bark against his head as he rolled it side to side. “Course not. She’s hurting so bad, she isn’t thinking straight.”

“And Tara?”

“No good. She wants to keep Red happy.”

Xander sighed. “But she knows I’m not going to help her, why is she still so gung-ho about this?”

“Harris, you best batten down the hatches, she’s not finished with you. As far as she can see, you’re what’s coming between her and this spell. She’s not giving up any time soon.”

Spike saw his body slump and Xander turned to press his back against the trunk. “There’s more? I don’t know if I can take much more, Spike.”

“Don’t know what I can say. Screen your calls, use your peep hole before you answer the door. Don’t be alone
with her at the Magic Box. Just keep your guard up, like I said, yeah?”

Spike felt the gaze on him, and when he turned, Xander was searching his face. “Why are you doing this?”

“What?”

“Helping me.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because you’re you, and I’m me and we don’t do-,” he paused, obviously searching for the right word. One sweeping hand gesture covered it. “We don’t do this. We fight, we argue, we try to kill each other. We don’t help, we don’t look for ways to work together.”

Spike wondered what kind of answer the boy was after. And while he had many he could give, he didn’t think it was the time to be dropping more spanners in the works. The boy had enough to be going on with, without Spike throwing about issues of friendships with former enemies and increasingly protective demons. No, the time for that may well come, but this was not it.

“It’s been a long few months. So maybe it’s just what we do now, yeah?”
“We help each other?”

“Among other things.”

Xander considered this for a long while. “I think that’s okay. It sounds good.”

“Right then. How about we go help each other get through the Bit’s film?”

There was a soft snort, then Xander’s shoulder pressed into Spike’s for just the briefest of moments as the boy levered himself upright. The heat of the human touch rivalled the remains of the burning in his palm. And, just like Xander’s hand the night before, Spike felt the warmth stay with him for an inordinately long time.

**Part Thirteen**

During ‘boys night in’, Spike and Xander introduced Dawn to the joys of popcorn as a movie critiquing device. So it was, that when Willow and Tara returned, they beat a hasty retreat, partially to avoid the clean up, but also to avoid the uncomfortable tension.

Dawn stood at the door, where she’d been halted by Spike. “Thanks guys, I had fun. How about next time we use a star rating system instead. It’s much prettier and there’s less salt on the carpet afterwards.”
“Whatever you like, Dawnie,” Xander said, kissing her cheek. “See you next week, okay? Call me if you need anything.”

“Anything, Niblet,” Spike reiterated. “You understand? And don’t let me catch you outside by yourself again, yeah?”

“Promise. I’m totally inside girl after hours. You know, unless something big and slimy comes and offers me candy and a ride, then I am so out of here.” Dawn giggled and dodged as Spike faked a swipe at her.

Behind Dawn, he could see Willow standing by the bottom of the stairs. Spike resisted the urge to say anything further, just patted Dawn on the cheek and stepped off the porch. “Behave yourself, Bit,” he called back. “Come on, Harris. Night’s still young.”

Spike glanced back and saw Xander hug Dawn, give Willow a tight smile then turn and trot down the stairs to join Spike on the path.

Spike stifled a growl as he heard Willow’s voice from inside the house. “Bye Xan. I’ll call you.”

He saw Xander stiffen then sag again, and without thinking, he laid a hand on the drooping shoulder. “Don’t let her get to you. She was saying that for my benefit.”
One final look back at the door, and Spike saw that Dawn had gone and Willow was watching them walk to the car. Spike flashed his yellow eyes and long fangs at her in warning, knowing there was little he could really do, but not willing to let her get the last parting shot. He had a feeling things would get worse before they got better in this issue.

“Um, Spike?”

Spike snapped his head around and saw Xander looking pointedly at the hand on his shoulder, then at the ridges of his demon face.

“Oh, right. Sorry.” Spike gave a flick of his head and the features settled back. “Just wanted to let her know we’re on to her.”

“Do you think it helped?”

“Not bloody likely, no. Maybe the opposite.”

“What do you mean?”

“I may have antagonised her a bit, earlier on. She pushed me though. Wouldn’t listen to reason so I may have threatened her with the demon.”
“You threatened to hurt her? With your, um-, that-, you let the demon out?”

“Not like I could actually do anything to her. And it didn’t do me great deal of good, anyway. She’s got some kind of personal ward. The bitch burned my hand.”

Xander snapped to attention then and immediately grabbed Spike’s arm, examining his hand. More interesting than Xander doing that, was the fact that Spike was left handed and this was the hand the boy was now checking over. He’d not automatically gone for the right as most would. The boy was more observant than some gave him credit for.

Spike stood patiently while Xander looked at his hand. Even with the vampire healing it was still slightly red, although there was only a mild pain now. Nothing a pint of blood wouldn’t set to rights.

“She did this? How? What did she do?”

“It’s nothing. It’ll be gone in a couple of hours.”

“You’re sure?”

“Course I’m sure, it’s my bloody hand isn’t it?”

“How did she do it?”
“Don’t know. She has a charm of some kind. Made her skin burn me where I was touching it.”

Xander turned as if he was going to back to the house, but Spike caught him and pushed him towards the car.

“Forget it. I’ll know not to touch her next time.”

Xander ran his hands through his hair. “God, this is getting too big. She’s gone this far? Is Dawn safe?”

“I’m sure she’s fine. The witch is just protecting herself. She knows I’m pissed off with her and I want to stop her. She’s just making sure I can’t hurt her. I don’t blame her. The demon is baying for her blood.”

“You want to go kill something? I’m not ready to go home just now. I think she’ll be trying to call me.” Xander took out his keys and opened the car.

Spike got in without even thinking. “I don’t know if tonight is a good night for you to come with me. I need to let loose, I wouldn’t want you to get caught up with that.”

“I know to stay out back. I won’t get in your way.”
“That’s not exactly what I’m worried about, Harris. It’s just not the best night,” Spike said, trying to hedge around the topic.

“Fine. I can go by myself if I need to,” Xander said, annoyance in his voice.

“No!” Spike snapped, a bit more harshly than he’d meant. “Christ, what is it with you lot? First Dawn, now you? You know better, too. You can’t go patrolling alone. That’d be a suicide mission.” Bloody manipulating humans. Spike sighed. “Right. You come with me, but you keep well back. Not far enough back that you get eaten by something, mind.”

“Got it. Eyes open, on guard.”

“I mean it. You get in the way of the demon, there’s no telling what could happen.”

Xander frowned as he drove. “Alright, I get it. I think you’ve made your point. You’re a bit edgy and you need your space. I told you, I’ll stay out of it.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence. Spike knew that it was risky taking the boy with him this time. There were too many factors at play. He was so on edge and beyond angry at the witch, and that alone automatically gave the demon a foothold. He felt the need for a good
vicious fight. He needed to spill blood and he needed to do it till he dropped.

Aside from that, there was the issue of the demon’s attitude to the boy. It was becoming protective. In the same way Spike felt the need to look after the girl, the demon was making noises about defending the boy, fighting for him, keeping him safe. It was a territorial instinct that Spike should have known would engage sooner or later, especially given his feeling about the boy. Spike longed for the time when there weren’t so many things getting him on edge, when he could just be him- singular and with no separate thoughts of the demon that moved him.

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Xander had loaded himself up with weapons. He had stakes and knives in his pockets, and hefted a long handled axe. Spike watched the way he handled the weapon and was satisfied with the training he’d been giving the boy. For an average human, he’d done well. He wasn’t muscular, but he was solid and had some weight to put behind a swing. His coordination wasn’t the greatest, but it would serve him well enough. Certainly, Xander was in a much better position to defend himself than he’d been prior to Buffy’s death.
Spike wondered why no one had really taken much of an interest in developing the boy’s skills, but then neither had Xander taken the initiative and asked for lessons. It took the loss of a friend and the realisation that things could happen, before he’d made the effort.

Rather than weighing himself down, Spike had put one knife in his back pocket. That would do him for this night. Aside from that small back up, he would go in bare handed. The way he liked it best- fast, brutal, bloody.

Spike stalked the paths, wearing his demon face, his senses heightened. His attention was on the immediate environment, including Xander. Spike kept the boy close as they searched for a fight. They found one sooner than Spike expected.

Both Spike and Xander could hear the crashing in the underbrush off to their left. Spike lifted his head and sniffed the air, cursing inwardly as he recognised the distinctive odour of an Azaaleh demon. This could be bad. Vicious, fast, strong and eager fighters, the Azaaleh were not an easy kill. Even though that’s what he’d been after, Spike knew that if he didn’t get the upper hand immediately the demon would go for the boy as well.

“Alright, now listen to me.” Spike drew up beside Xander and spoke quietly. “This thing coming is bad news. You
stay well out of the way.” Spike looked around and saw they were near a crypt. “See that alcove by the door? You get yourself back in there and stay out of sight, you hear me?”

“Why can’t I help?” Xander asked, looking off into the dark in the direction of the sounds.

“Because you wouldn’t last long enough to take a breath, and I will not have Bit lose anyone else. Are we clear?”

Xander stared at him for a moment, taking in the serious expression. “Okay fine. But what about you?”

Spike felt the knife in his pocket and knew it would not be enough. “Give me your axe. You’ll be fine if you stay out of the way.”

“What if a vampire comes?”

“Not a chance, they’ll steer well clear of this thing.”

“So why don’t you?”

“I need this. Besides, it’s probably got my scent now.”

Spike turned and nodded to the trees, where they could hear the demon getting closer. “Right, here it comes, get back over there now, Harris. Keep your eyes open, yeah?”
Spike waited until Xander was back in the shadows of the alcove, then satisfied, he turned to face the demon.

As he’d expected it was a hard, brutal fight. Neither gave an inch, but at least Spike was able to keep it well away from Xander’s position. Spike had let his own demon take control as soon as the fight began, there was no way, otherwise, that he would be any match for it at all.

He was covered in blood, both his own, from cuts and tears on his face, arms and torso, and that of the Azaaleh. He knew there were broken bones, he knew there was something not right inside, but still he fought. Spike couldn’t have stopped if he wanted to. He needed the outlet, the simplicity of the pain, the familiarity of the fight. All the issues with the witches, all the confusion over the sudden protectiveness of the boy, the developing interest in him, all those things unsettled him, but this- this was the one thing above all that might help bring the balance back.

Spike could scent the fear coming from Xander, and hoped to hell that the Azaaleh couldn’t detect it. The damn thing was so fast, Spike was using everything he had to keep up with it. One solid blow to his head and Spike was tumbling across the ground, closer to the crypt
where Xander hid. He willed the boy to stay back and silent, not to draw the demon’s attention.

Spike jumped back to his feet, feeling the grating of shattered bones in his ankle. He limped badly, but ignored the pain. Spike shook his head to clear the blood from his eyes, and charged at the demon, the axe already swinging in a wide arc. As he brought it around, he caught the expression on the Azaaleh’s face. It had noticed Xander. The demon dodged his swing easily and made for the crypt.

“Harris, incoming,” he shouted, while again swinging at the back of the demon. He couldn’t let it reach the boy, it would have him in no time at all. Spike flung his axe, connecting with the back of the demon’s knees. It howled and continued forward, ignoring the blood pouring from its legs.

Xander had taken a couple of knives from his pockets and was bracing himself, but the Azaaleh only managed two more steps before its legs gave out, the tendons having been severed by the axe. It fell to its knees, arms still swinging out at Spike. The talons on its hands were long and sharp and easily reached Spike’s leg, slashing through the flesh on his thigh.
Spike growled and snarled as he, too, stumbled, but he managed to keep his feet. Sidestepping the immobilised demon, Spike got around behind it and dived onto its back before it could reach for him again. The Azaaleh thrashed and blood from its torn and damaged arms sprayed through the air, but Spike held on. He manoeuvred his arms around its head and with a final cry at the sharp pains shooting through his abused body, he twisted its head until he heard the satisfying crunch of shattered vertebrae.

As the demon fell forward, Spike went with it, lying across its back, its head still in his hands. He was close to blacking out, his body wracked with pain both inside and out.

“Spike!” And then Xander was there next to him, pulling him up and away from the Azaaleh, increasing the pain a million times over as bones shifted, gashes opened and internal injuries bled. “Jesus, Spike, what have you done?”

Spike tried to raise an arm to check Xander over, but it fell limply back to his side. “Did it get you?”

“Me?” Xander voice was incredulous. “No, it didn’t touch me. But look at you.”
“Got my arse kicked,” Spike mumbled through split and swollen lips. “Kicked his more. Was bloody brilliant.”

“Yeah? Look at yourself. You’re broken, you nearly got killed. That was brilliant?” Even through the haze of pain, Spike could hear the fear and worry in Xander’s voice.

“That’s what I do.”

“Goddamn it. Come on, get up.” Xander got his arms around Spike’s chest and hauled him to his feet. “Can you stand?”

“Course I can.” Spike tried putting his weight on his legs and they buckled under him.

“That’s a no. How do I do this?”

“Crypt isn’t far. Shoulder.”

“Shoulder?” Xander asked. “Oh, over my shoulder? But you’re injured so many places, that can’t be good.”

“Just do it, don’t worry about me.”

“Too late.” Xander appeared to weigh up his options. Eventually he made up his mind to do as he’d been asked and bent down to fold Spike over his shoulder. Xander grunted as he straightened back up and Spike gratefully hung there, trying not to feel the damage inside and
biting back the pain. He tried to roll with the movements of Xander’s body as he hurried through the cemetery, stumbling and staggering under the dead weight, but the jarring of each step was like a new agony. Spike gave in to the blackness enveloping him.

Part Fourteen

Spike knew he must have only been out for a matter of minutes, because when he came to he was being lowered carefully onto the padded top of the high, cold slab in the upstairs of his crypt.

“Blood,” he grunted out, his words distorted by the swelling.

“Okay, but it’ll take a minute to warm.”

“No, just bring it. Three.”

“Three, right.”
A blackness began to creep in around the edges of his vision, but then Xander was back and he was holding a bag near Spike’s mouth. Spike lifted his head up and tried to bite the bag, but found he didn’t even have the strength for shifting his face. He was trying to focus his thoughts on this when Xander pulled a blade from his jeans pocket and cut a slit in the bag. Straining as he lifted up to the dripping blood, Spike felt a warm arm slide under his shoulder and hold him up to drink.

Spike managed to finish all three bags, then fell back to the slab, too tired, for the moment, to sit up any longer. Already he could feel the blood spreading through him, healing the smallest cuts and scrapes, and beginning to work on the largest and worst injuries. As he felt the swelling in his lip subside, Spike closed his eyes and focused on identifying the worst of his internal injuries. Not too many, and nothing major; all would heal well enough and some had already begun.

He heard Xander disappear for a moment and then was back with the first aid kit. “Okay, I need to look at you, there’s blood everywhere.” He began removing Spike’s shirt.
“Leave it be, I’ll be fine.” Spike tried to push Xander’s hands away, but several fingers were broken again and he didn’t get very far.

“No. You’re bleeding, we need to stop that and make sure your wounds are clean.”

“Why? Not like I’m going to die of a bloody infection.”

“Maybe not, but demons have poisons, right?”

“Not the Azaaleh.”

“So humour me then, okay?”

Spike took the time, then, to actually look at Xander. The boy was worried. His brow was furrowed, there was a hard set to his mouth. Spike sighed and relaxed back onto the makeshift bed. If it made him feel useful, Spike would let him do it. “Go on then.”

Xander cut away the black T-shirt; it was unsalvageable anyway, with all the tears and slashes and blood. Spike just lay back while Xander worked quickly, sponging off the blood and dirt, finally revealing the worst of the cuts underneath.

“Let me see,” Spike said, trying to sit up. Xander helped him lift his head enough to inspect the damage. “Right.
Just put a stitch in that one, the rest’ll be fine.” Spike pointed to a deep long gash across his side then fell back again. “Bloody hell, that was a good dust up.”

“You enjoyed that?” Xander asked, with disbelief.

“I’m a vampire, of course I enjoyed that.”

“But look at the state you’re in.”

Spike nodded in agreement. “But it’s a small price to pay. Demon’s happy, I’m happy. Unlife goes on.”

“But, this-.“

“This is nothing. The blood’s working fine, so most of it’ll be gone tomorrow. You just need to toss a couple of stitches in the worst of it that I can’t reach.”

Xander’s face reflected his horror. “I don’t know how.”

“No time like the present for a bit of a lesson, yeah? You can do it.”

“Won’t it hurt? What if I mess it up?”

Spike gave a small smile. “No doubt it’s going to hurt like a bitch, and don’t worry, I’ll talk you through it.”

Xander just stared and shook his head. “Alright. It’s your body, I guess.”
“And a damn fine one it was too, now let’s get it back in shape, yeah?”

Just as he was closing his eyes again, Spike caught Xander’s blush, before he quickly looked away and dug through the first aid kit. He lay still and gave instructions as Xander worked. The longest gash, he directed Xander to just put two stitches in, just to keep it together, until the blood kicked in and started it healing faster. Despite the pain, Spike was dozing, but soon came to when Xander nudged him gently.

“What’s the problem, Harris?”

Xander’s words tumbled out in an embarrassed heap. “I’ll have to take off your jeans.”

“What’s the problem, Harris?”

“Okay, but I, um, I’ll have to, um-.”

“Well, yeah. Get to it then, if you’re playing nursemaid.” Spike waved his hands in the air. “I’d help but my fingers are a bit worse for wear, I’d say a few are broken.”

“Um, okay. No problem.”
Spike could see it was a bit of a problem for him; Xander didn’t seem to know where to look as his hands reached for the button. Spike couldn’t stand to watch his indecision and discomfort any longer. “How about you just cut them off, eh? They’re not much good for anything now, are they?”

“Oh, I can do that, sure.” Xander visibly relaxed as he guided the scissors up the side seam of Spike’s jeans, stopping just before the waistband, he then folded the leg over so he could see the wound on Spike’s thigh. “Oh geez, this is bad. I can see-, it’s all-, god it’s so deep.”

“Help me up, I’ll have a look.” Spike grabbed hold of Xander’s arm and hauled himself upright. “Oh, that’s not much,” he said. “I’ve had worse. That might take a bit longer to heal, but I won’t lose a leg over it.”

“So, what should I do? Do I sew it up?”

“Yeah, that’d be best, ta. Soddin’ thing won’t heal right otherwise.”

“Same as I did before?” Xander looked less than pleased at the prospect.

“Exactly that,” Spike said, trying to reassure him. “You can do it.”
Xander nodded briefly and Spike lay back to let him get on with it. He’d only need the stitches in for a short time, so it didn’t matter if they weren’t perfect. Through slitted eyelids, Spike watched Xander lose his colour as he worked. He kept a steady focus on Spike’s leg, his mouth tightly closed. Spike could hear the deep calming breaths the boy was taking. This whole thing was a struggle for him, as much as he said he wanted to help.

Spike grunted as he pushed himself up and stilled Xander’s hand with his own. “I’m a bit more together now, how about I finish off here?” He held his other hand out for the needle, but noticed Xander’s gaze was fixed firmly on his own hand under Spike’s. Spike let him go, but Xander stared at his hand as if there was something still on it. “You go wash yourself off and have a drink. Pour me something strong while you’re at it, yeah?”

Xander looked like he wanted to be anywhere else; still, he also seemed reluctant to hand over the needle. “Can you do it? What about your fingers?”

“I’ve got enough in one piece, I can manage it. Go on, off you go, I don’t want you vomiting on my legs and honestly, you look like you’re about to bloody well hurl any second now, mate.”
Xander’s head jerked up at this and he stared at Spike with a frown.

“What?” Spike asked.

“You said-, uh, nevermind.” Xander passed him the needle. “I’ll go get some drinks.”

Spike watched him hurry over to the fridge, and as he finished stitching himself up, he mentally ran back through what he’d said. He didn’t think the boy would be squeamish over the vomiting comments. So what else had he said? Nothing of note, unless- mate? Could that be it? It was the only thing Spike could see that might have caught the boy unawares like that. Why should he be so twitchy over mate?

As he finished stitching his leg, a few pieces began to slide into place for Spike. Snapshots, images and impressions of Xander over the last two weeks or so. New found interest in the demon, concern for Spike’s health and wellbeing, frequent blushing and embarrassment, jumpy at odd comments, and the reluctance to leave as early as he used to. Then tonight, there was the embarrassment over removing Spike’s jeans and the great relief when Spike found a way around that. No. Those pieces could not be making the
picture Spike thought they were. He had to be wrong. That boy was straight as an arrow.

Spike put the last stitch in place and covered the wound with gauze and tape. Looking up, he could see Xander splashing water on his face, then sipping some from his cupped hands. First, he had to see to the injuries, then he could deal with the boy. Spike checked his ankle, and yes, it was broken, but not badly. He gritted his teeth and manipulated the bones so they would heal properly over night. He dug through the kit and found another roll of tape for his fingers, and bound them and several of his toes as well. All of this might have made the average man pass out, but Spike had not been an average man for a very long time. And putting himself back together was nothing new. Painful, yes. But also a reminder that no matter what madness was going on around him, he could still take things back to simple basics if need be, and balance himself again.

Finished with his treatments, Spike gingerly twisted himself around on the slab, and hung his legs off the edge. There was still a substantial amount of pain around some internal organs, but there was nothing he could do about it, except wait. With the blood he’d had, it would heal quicker than the outside.
Spike lifted the shredded leg of his jeans and snorted. Best get something else to wear, especially if his suspicions about the boy were right. There was an old pair of jeans lying nearby on the floor and Spike levered himself down carefully, and tried to bend to pick them up. He hadn’t meant to make a sound, but the sharp tugging at the gash on his side elicited a faint moan.

“Spike? What are you doing, you can’t be up yet, you’ll open up all those wounds.” Xander rushed over and tried to pull him back upright. “Let me get it. You’ll bust a stitch and there’s no way known to man I am doing that again tonight.”

“Stop your fussing, Harris. I can pick up my own jeans, I’m not completely useless.”

“Not completely, but as good as.” Xander pressed the jeans into Spike’s hands. “Can you do that yourself?”

“Course I can. Had three bags of blood, all the little things are close enough to healed.” Spike fumbled with the button on what was left of his jeans and was about to let down the zip when he noticed Xander watching his hands. A distinctive scent reached Spike’s nostrils. “Something I can help you with?”
Xander started, and again, spots of colour stained his cheeks. “Oh, no-, I was just-, you couldn’t, and I-. I’ll wait over there. Movie? I’ll put in a movie,” he said, pointing to the pile of DVDs.

Spike watched him go. He might have been able to pass off the rest as nervousness- the incessant blushing and such- but having caught the vaguest whiff of pheromones mixed with a good dose of fear, Spike knew he’d been right in his assessment. Xander Harris was having a bit of an identity crisis. Apparently, even seemingly straight arrows could change trajectory.

Normally Spike would pounce on the opportunity, but this was different. Regardless of Xander’s unwillingness to label it, they were friends. Mates. That was something Spike had come to value. Yes, they were vampire and human, but Spike had always had a need for closeness and companionship. Their new friendship was unconventional for him, but not unwelcome.

This, however, was a new turn. It was something that Spike would never have expected. And judging by his reactions, it was not something Xander had expected either. As with their not-friends status, Spike decided to let this lie. Obviously the boy was having some issues with it, perhaps denying it to himself, perhaps not even
aware of it for what it really was. Maybe he just considered it a ‘man-crush’. Spike snorted. Ridiculous new labels humans created to justify a good friendship; one that might stretch the boundaries of what society deemed to be acceptable.

Whatever was happening, the long and short of it was that Xander was feeling some attraction to Spike. Rather than being disgusted or put-off, Spike took it as a compliment. As far as he was concerned, this just added a new dimension to their friendship. He would have to tread carefully though, it would be all too easy to unintentionally hurt the boy or embarrass him with a wayward comment.

Spike thought about where they’d been, how far they’d come. Xander, especially. It was highly likely that anything the boy had going on in his head was nothing more than a reaction to them helping each other through a difficult time. That kind of thing happened. Maybe it wouldn’t be long till he got past it. A bit more healing and anything could happen.

Feeling warm and somewhat pleased, also a fair bit of pain from the various injuries, Spike took the drink Xander had left on the table, and settled himself carefully into an armchair.
“Cheers, mate,” he said, raising his glass. “I appreciate the first aid.”

Xander mumbled something incoherent in the way of a dismissal and hit the play button.

Spike smiled into his glass. His unlife was definitely taking some interesting turns of late.

Part Fifteen

Spike hated being powerless. There was bugger all he could do, really; the chip saw to that, and so did Willow’s magic. He knew there was no way he could touch her, the pain was like holding a crucifix against his skin. Spike had no doubt that it would be the same with the blonde witch. They both knew how he felt, so they’d both protect themselves.

Nor could Xander touch them; although for entirely different reasons. Willow was his friend, and Spike knew that no matter how much the girl hurt him, Xander would never strike out at her. Not that Spike would
expect him to, or even want him to, but it just limited the ways they could deal with the issue at hand.

The witches had been keeping a low profile; just quick visits in and out of the Magic Box. The watcher was too self absorbed at the moment to notice anything much, but the Niblet, now she was a different matter. Spike didn’t know if she’d taken to his story about the household finances causing stress. She was a bright girl, she could read her friends and detect something between them, but she wasn’t bringing it up; just watching them warily. Each time they met, Spike tried to reassure her there was nothing wrong.

Xander wasn’t faring too well, either. In the week since he’d patched up Spike, he’d been subjected to endless phone calls from Willow, trying to convince him that her way was the way. All credit to him, he was resisting her efforts. The boy had needed a good work out mid week though. He’d gone hand to hand with a few fledges and got his arse kicked again, but jumped right back up and gave them what for.

Their Friday night at the bar had been brief, and again, Spike took him out patrolling. After observing the boy at every opportunity, he’d come to the conclusion that he’d been right in his assumptions about Xander’s feelings. It
was just small things that gave it away: an extra light in his eye, a broader smile than usual, the bloody near-constant blushing. There was the one thing that left no doubt; Xander couldn’t disguise the chemical changes his thoughts triggered. For Spike, it all confirmed that Xander was feeling something more than friendship.

Far from making him uncomfortable, the knowledge just increased Spike’s desire to protect the boy; protect him from the Hellmouth and from his best friend. And, perhaps, if it became necessary, protect him from both himself and Spike.

Spike was under no misconceptions about how much his own need for companionship played into this, but if good company came from this unexpected source, then so be it. He would take what he could from where he could. Exactly how much he wanted to take, Spike wasn’t sure he was ready to think about just yet. He was just happy to accept the friendship on offer.

With these thoughts in his head, Spike headed to the Magic Box on Saturday evening. Fully expecting to walk into a tense situation and prepared to defend the boy, he was surprised to pick up Xander’s familiar scent on the breeze. Closer to the store, Spike could see a dark form leaning against the wall outside.
Xander looked exhausted. Facing the wall, his forehead rested on his folded arms. Even from several doors away, Spike could hear the deep steadying breaths Xander was taking. He made a noise with his boots, giving Xander time to collect himself. As he neared, Spike knew Xander was aware of his presence, but still hadn’t moved.

“Bad night?” Spike stopped next to him and lit a cigarette.

Xander’s muffled voice agreed. “Bad night.”

“Red?”

“Yeah.”

Spike berated himself for not getting there early. “Sorry, I should have been here.”

Xander’s head rolled back and forth on his arms. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Course it matters. I told you I’d help you out.”

“What can you do? Seriously? What can either of us do?”

Spike sighed and knew he was right. “I don’t know. But you shouldn’t be putting up with that on your own.”
Xander stood up and rubbed his hands over his face. Spike could see the stress there. “God, I wish I could take that contracting work, just get right away from her.”

“But you won’t?” Spike asked, surprised at just how much he hoped Xander would say no. Again, the demon rumbled its displeasure at the idea.

“Can’t. I can’t leave Dawn alone with her.” Xander sagged back against the wall, his shoulder just barely brushing Spike’s.

“Hmm.”

“I need to go back inside.” Xander looked hesitantly at the door. “I can do this.”

He pushed himself up to go, but Spike grabbed his wrist and held him back, smiling a little at the scent that burst from Xander at his brief touch. Xander’s wrist was warm and soft, and Spike could detect the quickening pulse underneath his thumb. He let it go. “Hang on a minute, yeah? Let me finish this smoke, and we can go in together. Witch probably won’t try anything then.”

Xander gave him a grateful smile and relaxed. “Yeah, okay, that’s good.”
Spike took his time, glad of the dark and quiet, and the time for Xander to calm down before they had to go into the harsh lights and harsher atmosphere. Too soon, he could feel the burning close to his fingers and he dropped the butt to the ground.

“Alright then, mate. Let’s not put this off anymore. You ready?”

“She won’t do anything while you’re here, so yeah, I’m ready.”

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Just as they both expected, Willow and Tara said nothing, while he was in Spike’s company. There were plenty of loaded looks and attempts to get Xander on his own, but he stuck close by either Spike, Giles or Dawn.

Even when Spike diverted Dawn to the training room as Giles sent the Buffy Bot out on its rounds, Xander went too. Spike killed some time teaching Dawn how to handle a stake, and Xander killed some time poking gentle fun at Dawn and distracting her from the noises in the shop.

“Do you think you’ll still be laughing when the vamps eat me cause you wouldn’t let Spike teach me this stuff?” Dawn asked him, trying to look stern but only just managing to stifle her own giggles.
“Dawnie, good luck getting out anywhere on your own, where a vamp could get at you. Look how many people it’d have to get though.”

“You know I appreciate you guys watching out for me, but I have to go back to school eventually, don’t I? Who’s going to follow me there?”

“Doesn’t your school have sewer access?” Spike asked with a smirk.

Dawn gasped long and loud. “Oh, you wouldn’t!” she said as she lunged at him with the stake.

Spike grabbed her hand and easily stepped behind her, holding her still with an arm carefully around her neck. “Hey, pet, I’m evil, remember? Course I would.”

Xander moved in closer and flicked her lightly on the nose. “Spike will take care of the evil, and I’m sure I could take a few extra minutes at lunch to come down and make sure none of those hormonal teenage boys are hanging around.”

“Oh, and I thought Buffy was bad with this stuff, I hated her when she-.” Dawn’s eyes suddenly widened and filled with tears as she realised what she’d said. “Oh. No, I don’t hate her. Oh god, I didn’t mean that, I meant-.” Dawn’s voice broke and the tears came.
Spike loosened his arm around her neck and let her sag forward against Xander, sobbing.

“Hey, Dawnie, it’s okay, we know what you meant,” Xander said as he wrapped his arms around her. “We know you don’t hate her. She knows too, sweetie.”

“Niblet, you’re alright now, we know you love your big sis,” Spike said softly while he stroked her hair.

Over her shoulder, Spike caught Xander’s eyes and wasn’t surprised to see them shining and wet with sympathy for Dawn. He resisted the urge to comfort Xander as well. So much time had passed, and they all put up brave fronts, but everything was still so close to the surface.

“I’m sorry,” Dawn sniffled against Xander’s chest.

“That’s okay, you just go ahead and blow your nose on Harris’s shirt, yeah?”

Dawn gave a soft laugh and pulled a tissue out of her pocket. “It’s been so long, I thought I was okay, now. But everyone has been so weird lately, it’s just been a bit harder.”

“Weird how?” Xander asked, wiping at his eyes.
“Something’s going on.” She turned and looked at Spike. “I know you said it was a money thing, but Willow and Tara have been acting so strange. They whisper a lot and spend more time in their room. And Xan, you get this funny look on your face now, when you see Willow. It’s almost like you don’t want to be around her.”

Spike led Dawn over to the couch and sat her down. Xander sat on her other side. “Bit, listen to me now. There’s nothing for you to worry about. The witches are just a bit stressed, Harris here is too. Everyone misses your sis, and on top of that they’re all worried about each other and trying to deal with everyday issues. It’s what humans do. And the older they get, the more they find to worry about.”

Dawn eyed him sceptically. “You promise that’s it?”

Spike had absolutely no compunctions about lying to the girl to protect her. “Yeah, Bit. I promise there is nothing you need to be worried over. Right?”

“I promise too, Dawnie. I’m sorry if we’ve been getting all bad vibey at you. There’s really nothing you need to be concerned about.”

“You know what would make it all better?” Dawn asked with a sly sideways peek at both of them.
God not another action movie, Spike hoped, but out loud he said, “Anything, name it.”

“Can we have another boy’s night, but at your place?”

Spike stared at her, wondering if he’d heard wrong. “You want to watch movies and eat take out in my crypt?”

“Wouldn’t it be fun? Please say yes, I promise I’ll clean up and I won’t touch anything, and I won’t say anything if you want to drink blood and tell me stories about the good old days. Please?”

“Dawnie, there’s no plumbing at Spike’s,” Xander told her.

“Silly, I don’t want to take a shower-, oh. I get it. No plumbing.” Dawn looked awkwardly at her hands, then jumped in her seat. “Right, so then you can take me to that building that has the main office in it, and it has public bathrooms outside, right? You can open that up for me, can’t you, Spike? I mean, vampire strength has to be good for something doesn’t it?”

Spike rolled his eyes. This is what he was reduced to? Breaking and entering in the ladies loo? “I think you might have put a bit of thought into this, pet.”
“Well, a girl should always be prepared where bathrooms are concerned, and a teenager should always be prepared for when the answer is no. It’s the way of the world.”

“Ah, so young, yet so wise,” Xander dug her in the ribs with his elbow, then looked over her head at Spike. “What do you say? Can you stand to have your space invaded yet again? Another movie night at your place?”

Dawn frowned at them. “Another movie night? Who’s been invading your space, Spike?”

Spike looked questioningly at Xander, who merely shrugged and raised his hand. “Ah, that would be me. I might have stopped over to watch a movie. Just once or twice.”

“Oh!” Dawn grinned. “Oh, I knew you guys were friends, this is great. So, yes? We can have boy’s night at your place, Spike?”

Spike knew he would need to be a much stronger vampire to resist the hopeful, pleading eyes she turned his way. “Bloody hell. Fine. Yes. My place. But next week, yeah?”

“Great. I’m so excited. Oh, but I should ask Willow, shouldn’t I? Will she say yes?”
Spike gave her a tight smile. The witch wouldn’t dare say no to him, and would probably like the time to herself anyway. “No doubt. What say you and I go out there now and ask her. I’ll bet you half a dozen tabbies and a Persian, she says it’s okay.”

“Great! But not the cat gambling, that’s all kinds of wrong.” Dawn jumped up and grabbed Spike and Xander’s hands, hauling them to their feet. “Oh, I love you guys.” She hugged them both in turn. “I’m glad I have you. And I’m glad you have each other. Guys need best friends too.” Dawn spun away and pulled open the training room door, stopping just short of dancing out into the store.

Xander turned to Spike with a faint smile. “She’s easy to please.”

“She’s a girl. Give her a few years and tell me that again. You can never please a woman.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. I think I’ll just give up trying.”

Spike noticed that Xander hadn’t made any effort to deny Dawn’s labels of ‘friends’ or even ‘best friends’ and guessed that that was a step in the right direction; although, it seemed to Spike that their relationship was always one step ahead of what the boy was willing to
admit to. And hold up- had he just thought of this as a ‘relationship’?

But that’s exactly what it was. A difficult one to label at the present moment, but of course, it was a relationship of sorts. Changing week by week, giving them both something that they needed; but definitely a relationship. And it was the fluctuating boundaries of their developing friendship that Spike was enjoying the most.

**Part Sixteen**

“I can’t believe it,” Dawn squeaked. “God, I so thought she would never let me do this. It’s gonna be so cool, isn’t it Xan? Saturday night, hanging with my guys.”

Spike watched Xander’s expression change from a smile of greeting to one of a man gathering every last ounce of patience. He guessed Dawn had done her usual trick, and talked a mile a minute since Xander had picked her up from the house; and since they’d met Spike at his cemetery’s main gates, she still hadn’t stopped for breath.

“I know Willow said last week it would be okay for me to come, but that was last week and I just kept expecting her to change her mind. But she didn’t. Yay for me.”
“Yeah, yay for you, Dawnie. Again,” Xander sighed and shifted the stack of pizza boxes he carried under his arm. “Maybe you could tell Spike how great it is.”

Spike smirked at him but still jumped in to Xander’s rescue. “Bit, not that I’m being improper or anything, or rather I am, I just don’t give a toss- but did you go before you left? Otherwise we can make a stop at the admin building now and save the trip later.”

“Eww, Spike, I’m not a kid, you know.” Dawn screwed up her face in disgust. “I can hold on for more than five minutes.”

“Just doing my duties as a good host, pet. Don’t want any nasty accidents later. Onwards then, shall we?”

Throwing a frown over her shoulder at his indelicacy, Dawn rushed on ahead, but pulled up quickly at Spike’s sharp shout. “Oi! You stick with me, yeah? You don’t go running off in a boneyard, you silly-.”

“Hey!” Xander swatted Spike lightly on the arm. “What Spike was about to say was, you know better than that. Come back here with us.”

With a quick apology, Dawn trotted back between Xander and Spike. Linking her arms with theirs, she ignored Spike’s pained expression. “Sorry, guys. I’m just
so excited; it’s getting weird at home with all the not talking.”

“They still shutting you out, Bit?” Spike asked.

“Not exactly. They just seem real busy with stuff, and they don’t sit around with me as much as they used to. I guess I could be studying, but-.”

“Study? Pfft. Forget that. For tonight, we shall eat of the crap and watch of the manly flicks,” Xander said with a grin. “Speaking of- what do you have for us tonight?”

“Oh, I think you’re gonna love it. All the guys do.” Dawn fished in her bag and pulled out a plastic case. “Rambo!”

Spike stopped dead in his tracks. There wasn’t much he wouldn’t do for Dawn but he had to draw the line somewhere. “Right. That’s it.”

Dawn looked worried. “What?”

“No Rambo. No more Jackie fucking Chan, no more action films. I think I would rather go sunbathing on the beach than watch another soddin’ action movie.”

“You don’t like the movies I picked?” Dawn asked.

Spike heard the tremor in her voice and knew he was just too damned impulsive sometimes; this being a perfect
example. But no backing out now, not with the evening that potentially lay ahead. “No, Niblet. I don’t like those movies. Sorry.”

Xander slung an arm around her shoulders. “Dawnie, as far as movies for entertaining a vampire go, those are probably not the best choice.”

Dawn spun and faced Xander. “Oh! You don’t like my movies either?”

“Oh. Um, well, they were interesting and were great movies in their day, or so I heard, but-.”

Dawn planted her hands firmly on her hips and glared at both of them, any chance of tears now gone. “Oh. My God. You two totally hate the movies I picked. All this time you just played along, letting me think I was doing the right thing but the whole time you must have been getting together and saying ‘oh look at Dawn, she picks crappy movies, she’s so lame’.”

Xander responded to that somehow, Spike vaguely caught a comment about the movies being less important than the time spent together, but it was overshadowed by a single thought. A thought planted by Dawn’s outburst. *Just play along.* The girl may just have
come up with a solution to a problem she knew nothing about.

“Isn’t that right, Spike?” Xander had finished his spiel and was nudging him. “You tell her.”

“Yeah, what he said,” Spike answered, still half lost in his own thoughts. A plan was taking shape, but he wanted to flesh it out completely before he confronted Xander with it. “Let’s get a move on, yeah? Not good to be standing outside so long.”

Spike steered them on to the crypt, not really listening to the exchange still going on between Xander and the girl. He held the door for them when he arrived and hid a smile at Dawn’s excited noises. Didn’t take her long to get over the movie issue.

“Oh, this is so cool. This is way cooler than my place. Don’t you think, Xan?”

“Sure, sweetie. So cool it’s hot.”

Dawn scoffed at his comment and lay herself down on the floor with a pile of cushions Spike had thought to bring up from below. “So, seeing you guys hate my taste in movies, what are we gonna watch?”
Spike pointed to the movie cases lying around the floor near the television. “A number of choices there. Help yourself. You can’t go wrong with any of those.”

Dawn scooted forward and dug through the piles, while Spike made drinks and Xander unpacked the pizzas and bread. “But these are all horror movies,” Dawn said with some surprise.

“Sure they are, what did you think they’d be? My Little Pony?” Xander teased.

Dawn turned a horrified face towards him. “Xander! I was five when I watched that. I’m a little older now though.” She shuffled through the movies. “I don’t know, I guess I thought you guys would be over all the horror, seeing as we live it most days.”

Spike handed her a soda and dropped into his chair, distractedly taking a slice of pizza from the box Xander offered. “Ta, mate,” he mumbled by way of thanks, smiling to himself as he noticed the way Xander’s heartbeat sped up for just a moment.

“Dawnie, you’ve seen the things that hide under the bed and in the closet up close and personal, just like the rest of us. These movies are nothing like that. This is just fun,
a way to unwind. We watch them for the comedic value, not the thrills and chills.”

Dawn snorted and gave him a sceptical look as she held up a particular DVD box. “Yeah, and I bet it’s a real hardship for you two to watch this one with the girls in swimsuits with big boobs running from the guy with the butcher’s knife and Mickey Mouse mask. Right, Spike? Spike!”

Spike forced his thoughts away and tried to focus on the conversation. “Ah, girls with big knives, yeah, watch that.”

Dawn rolled her eyes at him and went back to the pile of discs.

“Spike, everything okay?” Xander asked quietly while Dawn set up the disc. “Is there anything wrong? You’re all distracto vamp tonight.”

“I’m what? Oh, no, nothing. I was just thinking on a problem.”

“Anything I can do?”

“Maybe later, yeah?”

“Is it-.”
“Later, mate. Not the right time.” Spike looked pointedly at Dawn on the floor.

He could see that Xander had an inkling about what it was, but Spike was not about to share his thoughts with Dawn so near. He would mull it over, look for holes and later, maybe if she fell asleep, they could go over it together, see if the boy would be in it.

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Two movies and several bags of popcorn later, Xander stretched. “It’s late, I’ll call Willow and tell her Dawn is staying here,” Xander said, looking at the sleeping form of the girl on the floor. “That’s okay, isn’t it?”

“More than. Got your cell?” Spike asked with a grin.

“Play nice,” Xander warned as he hit Willow’s number and passed the phone over.

“Not bloody likely.” Spike waited for a moment, and soon heard the witch’s voice on the other end.

“Xander hi, is anything wrong? Have you changed your mind?”

“Nothing wrong, Red. And no. Nobody has changed their mind, nobody will. Your plan is complete fucking lunacy.”
“Spike? Why have you got Xander’s cell? Is he okay?”

Spike scowled and resisted the urge to yell at her. “Course he okay, you silly bint. He’s right here. I just rang to tell you the Niblet is staying here tonight. She’s asleep and it’s too late to stuff around bringing her back.”

“Oh. I don’t know if that’s a good idea. Maybe she should come home.”

Spike prepared himself for a fight, but toned it down when he caught the worried face Xander was wearing. “Right, witch. Let’s talk about good ideas, shall we?”

Willow sighed heavily. “Alright, she can stay. But how is she going to get home tomorrow?”

“Harris has a car, he can take her.”

“Spike, let me talk to Xander.”

“What’s that, Red? I think this thing is out of juice. Can’t hear you. Losing the signal.” Spike hit the disconnect button and tossed the phone back to Xander. “I’ll get Niblet downstairs to bed, then you and me got some talking to do.”
Xander nodded and started clearing up the empty pizza boxes and popcorn bowls, while Spike woke Dawn and helped her down to his bed.

“Where are you going to sleep?” Dawn mumbled as she climbed down the ladder.

“Never you mind, Bit. There’s a couple of comfy chairs and some blankets around, I’ll be fine. You just go and get cosy down there.”

Spike waited until he could hear Dawn getting into bed, then waited a little longer, until he could hear her deep rhythmic breathing. As soon as he was sure she was asleep again, Spike poured himself a drink and turned to Xander.

“How bad do you want to stop Red?” he asked, and motioned Xander to sit, as he perched himself on the arm of the other chair.

“No less than you, why?”

“Might just have an idea. You think you might be able to handle a bit of subterfuge?”

“I don’t know. Do I have to play twenty questions with you here, or are you just gonna tell me?”
Spike took a moment to size him up. They had precious few options, and Spike knew Xander wanted to do something to stop the witch, but he wondered if this might be asking too much. Certainly the boy had become stronger, emotionally, over the past month or two. They all still had their moments, but they were now few and far between. Spike hoped his suggestion wouldn’t break Xander’s tenuous hold on normality.

“Spike? The way you’re looking at me doesn’t instil me with a lot of confidence, you know?”

Spike nodded. “Sorry, mate. See the Niblet there gave me an idea earlier. Now, neither of us can do anything much to restrain them, and Red has the books she needs, so we know they’ve probably got the spell all sussed out.”

“We don’t know which spell though, or how she needs to do it.”

Spike stood and paced back and forth in front of Xander. He really needed a smoke but not with the girl downstairs. “That’s right. But if we did, then we could possibly do something to fuck it up for her.”

“She’s not going to tell us anything about the spell,” Xander said with resignation.
“She’s not going to tell me anything about the spell. But you’re her best friend, yeah?”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean she’s just going to spill the magic beans and tell all.”

“But what if she thought you were on her side? What if you got on the phone and said you’d had a change of heart, you see how much everyone misses the slayer, how much her little sis is hurting, and you want to help get her back.”

“You want me to use a child’s grief and to lie to my best friend.”

Spike decided it was not the time for tiptoeing around the boy. “I do.”

Xander closed his eyes for a brief moment then met Spike’s squarely. “What next?”

“Next, you find out what spell she’s using, what ingredients or mystical what-nots she needs, then we can make sure she doesn’t get hold of one of the key parts.”

“So you’re suggesting we just hide the eye of newt and toe of frog and dent the cauldron and she won’t be able to do the spell?”
“All I can think of right now.”

Xander sat forward in the chair and dropped his head into his hands. His voice was muffled. “I don’t know if I’ll be any good at lying to her. What if I mess it up?”

Spike crouched on the floor in front of him, and when Xander looked up, Spike gave him a tight smile and a nod. “I think you can do it.”

“Why?”

Spike had expected a denial or an argument; the question caught him by surprise. “Why? Because you’re a man who does what needs to be done. You’re the one who gives it your all, even if it’s beyond you; you can do any bloody thing you put your mind to. Even if it doesn’t pan out, I know you’ll have given it your best.”

A small frown played over Xander’s face, along with the inevitable red flush creeping up from his neck. “You have a lot more confidence in me that I do.”

“Well past time you did something about that then, yeah?” Spike said, then stood up and fished around in his pockets. “So what do you think?” he asked, as he threw open the crypt door and lit a cigarette.
Xander sat back and crossed his legs. “I can’t really say no after that little speech, can I?”

“Course you bloody well can, mate. It was my idea, but you’re the one’s gotta pull it off. Don’t you go jumping into this if you’re not one hundred percent on board. We can always come up with something else.”

“Can we? I don’t know that we really have a lot of avenues here. This might be the best shot at stopping her. Definitely the easiest, if we can just destroy some herbs or candles, or break a bowl or something. Also, this way keeps Giles and Dawnie right out of it.”

Spike nodded his agreement. “So?”

“I’m in. I’ll talk to her tomorrow when I take Dawn home.”

Spike shut and bolted his door then stood in front of Xander, a no nonsense expression on his face. “That’s all well and good, but you don’t try to do this all on your own, yeah? You need anything, or it gets too much, you come to me, right? You might be the one with his arse on the line, but we’re in this together.”

Xander stood and held out his hand to Spike. “Deal.”
Spike shook with Xander, and with his free hand, he squeezed Xander’s shoulder. “Deal.”

He could hear the increased heart beat and pretended not to notice when Xander held on a little longer than expected.

Part Seventeen

Spike had been sleeping soundly in the recliner, when he felt a nudge. Far too early to be awake, he grumbled and was about to turn away, but then noticed the warm hand resting on his shoulder.

“Spike. Hey, Spike?” Xander’s voice was soft yet insistent. “Wake up a minute, okay?”

Spike reluctantly opened his eyes to find Xander looming over him. “It’s not even noon yet, Harris. This better be good.”

“It’s just after nine, I’m taking Dawnie home and talking to Willow.”
Then Spike looked at him. Really saw him and knew that even though Xander’s voice was calm and casual, inside he was in turmoil. It was in the tight lines of his face, the minute furrows on his brow that said the calm was only a thin mask. He’d better get that sorted before he tried to pull one over on the witch. She’d see through that guise even quicker than Spike had.

“Right then. You want me to come with you?” The offer came before he could really think, there was just the urge to give some support, to be there in case it all went pear-shaped.

“It’s nine in the morning, Spike. As in the sunny side of the clock. You wouldn’t make it far.” Xander smiled. “But thanks anyway.”

It was then that Spike realised that Xander’s hand was still on his shoulder and he couldn’t help but glance at it. No sooner had Spike shifted his head, than the warm touch was gone and Xander was backing away, reaching out for Dawn.

“Okay, so we’re gonna go,” he said quickly, ushering Dawn to the door. “Dawnie here needs some serious bathroom time-.”

“Xander! Oh my god. I meant I want to take a shower.”
“Whatever. Let’s get going, we need to let Spike sleep; it’s the middle of the night for him, right?”

“Ungodly bloody hour,” he agreed.

“Um, Spike? When is a godly hour for demons?” Dawn asked him with a grin.

“Not the point. Off you go home now, Bit.” Spike pushed himself out of the chair and walked with them, standing well back from the arc of sunlight that came through when Xander opened the door.

“Thankyou,” Dawn said, squeezing Spike in a happy hug. “I had fun. Maybe we can do it again soon?”

Spike hugged her back then pushed her out the door. “Maybe. Let me get over this one first.”

“Great, that’s a yes! Come on Xan.” Dawn slung her bag over her shoulder and waved to Spike as she headed for the path back to the car.

“Oi, Niblet. Not too far ahead, yeah? It’s still a Hellmouth no matter how sunny. Just plant it right there while I have a word with Harris here.” Spike watched her till she had stopped rolling her eyes, and was sitting on a tombstone waiting for Xander.
Xander stood in a patch of sunlight, on the crypt’s threshold, looking as though he was torn between staying and leaving. Spike had been going to spout all the cautions and warnings he had thought of, but was distracted by the realisation that he rarely saw these people so close up in the sunlight. It was definitely eye catching the way their hair and eyes changed colour with the light. Nothing like his own.

“Do I have something in my hair?” Xander asked, as he ran a hand over his head then checked his fingers.

“Nah, mate.” Spike laughed at himself. The last thing he wanted was to be turning into a brooding nancy like his sire. “But listen. You need to shape up a bit. You go in there not one hundred percent into this thing and she’s going to pick it up straight away.”

“Yeah I know. I think I just need Dawn talking at me on the trip home and I’ll be okay.”

“Right. Then you best head off and be careful, yeah? You don’t think you can handle it, you back out. Don’t push your luck, just let it go and we’ll find another way.”

Xander shook his head emphatically. “I want to try this. I think it might be what we need. I know I’m going to hate every minute of lying to her but it’s got to be done.”
“Think of it as helping her. If it goes as badly as it could, then she’s going to have to live with herself after. You’re just doing your bit to stop that happening later.”

“And you? What are you doing?” Xander stared at him intently.

Spike gave him the most simple, honest answer he had. “Doing my bit for people I don’t want to see hurt anymore.”

“Dawn.”

“No, not just her. Now get her out of here, she needs to be safe inside.”

Xander leaned forward into the shadows and held his hand out to Spike. “Thank you. I know it’s a big deal that you’re doing things like this for us, so, just, thanks, okay?”

“None needed, mate.” Spike took a firm grip and shook his hand, seizing the opportunity to enjoy the warmth of skin that had been in the sun. “You just make sure you let me know how this goes today, yeah?”

Xander gave him a nod and left. Spike watched until they were out of sight then bolted his door. He hoped that Xander would be able to handle this task. It wasn’t the
most elaborate of plans, but then Spike knew those were the ones least likely to succeed – too many variables. Keep it simple was a principle that applied to many a situation, a principle that was rarely reflected in his own dealings, but one he hoped would see this through.

Spike looked at the recliner and his blanket still lying across the arm and debated whether to sit up and wait for word on how it had gone. Xander hadn’t actually said he would be coming back. And it was Sunday, not one of their regular nights out. No, he’d go downstairs and sleep, it was unlikely the boy would be back today anyway.

Much later, Spike woke tangled in sheets that still smelled faintly of Dawn. It was a scent he used to associate with laughter and sunlight, but now the associations were more subdued - quiet sadness and loss. Those hung over the group of humans like a heavy cloud, they had done for months now, and even though there was a growing break in that cloud, he could feel another, darker cover looming beyond the sliver of light. The witch and her plans. With no small amount of frustration, Spike pushed the thoughts of Willow aside and tried to doze.
It was late afternoon, heading for early evening; still too early to go out, and, he realised after a half-hearted attempt, too late to try and sleep again. Spike kicked off the sheets and stretched, a bottle of amber liquid catching his eye as he twisted. Ah, breakfast. Spike sighed as he climbed off the bed, making a mental note to keep the bottle close by on the nightstand in future. As he drank from the bottle, one part of his mind was busy planning his night. Some patrol, a good fight or two, maybe some drinks somewhere that wasn’t his crypt. Those thoughts gradually gave way, however and soon he found himself worrying.

Had Xander spoken to his witch friend? Had he kept it together and managed to convince her of his change of heart? Spike supposed that if it hadn’t worked, he might have heard by now. But then, if the witch had gotten angry at the deception, perhaps the boy was in trouble. Spike took another swallow and cursed his lack of a telephone and cursed the sun for what could well have been the thousandth time, but was likely more.

As various scenarios played out in his head, Spike paced, twisting the now empty bottle between his hands. When he heard the crack and felt the glass slice into his palm, he caught himself. Pacing about and worrying like a ponce wouldn’t help matters any.
“Snap out of it,” he told himself. “This is beneath you, fussing over a human. Fussing over Xander Harris.” The cool blood oozing into his hand did more than any amount self berating could to break his mood, and Spike licked it away, setting off real hunger pangs in his stomach.

Grateful for something to do, he pulled his jeans on and climbed the ladder to warm some blood bags. He finished several quickly, then before he could get to pacing again, switched on the television and sat to watch. Whatever program he’d turned on was just background noise, a soundtrack for his thoughts, as the images of Xander’s meeting with the witch took centre stage again.

Spike gave up waiting patiently and took to the floor, pacing a circuit of the crypt that took him past a window, where, on each lap, he again cursed the slowly setting sun. On the next pass, he dug through the seat cushion and came up with a crumpled packet of cigarettes. There was a cheap, disposable lighter down the back of the other seat and so Spike paced and smoked.

He didn’t know what he was going to do when the sun finally went down. He had no invite to the boy’s apartment, and he certainly couldn’t show his face at the
Summer’s house if all had gone according to plan. That left the Magic Box. But even there, he wouldn’t be able to find out any information until it was time to leave.

Spike had long lost count of what lap he was on, when he heard familiar footsteps approaching his door. Xander. Relief flooded through him, and he called himself all kinds of idiot for it. Cigarette shoved between his lips, he threw back the bolts on the door and hauled it open. This late in the day there would be no sunlight, but he stood well back out of habit.

“How did you know I was here?” Xander asked as he walked up to the door.

“ Heard you, know your sounds.” Spike waved him in then slammed and locked the door again. “Drink?”

“Any beer left?”

Spike nodded and busied himself making drinks while Xander took up his regular position in the recliner.

“So?” Spike asked. He handed Xander a can of beer then sat in the other chair. He only lasted seconds then was up and pacing again, now anxious to hear what had happened.
“I think it went okay. I hated doing it as much as I thought I would.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I waited till Dawn was up in the shower, then I just said how hard it was to see Dawn so sad, and Giles too. How hard it was to go patrolling without her, and to see the bot looking so much like her.”

“And every word, the truth.”

“Yeah it was, so that part was easy. So then I said I’d been thinking about what she wanted to do and that it might just be the answer. I said that I wanted to be able to trust her because she was my best friend, and Buffy’s best friend and she wouldn’t do anything to harm Buffy.”

“Again, that part was no lie.”

“No, it wasn’t. I do wish I could trust her. I know I can’t though because she just isn’t thinking clearly on this one.”

“No, mate, she’s not. She has this tunnel vision and its all hugs and puppies as far as she can see. She’s completely overlooking the mine field right in front of her waiting to blow up those puppies.”
“Um, graphic, but yeah.”

“Sorry. So how did she take all this? You think you convinced her?”

“She just sat there, you know? Just for a minute and I seriously thought I’d blown it. But then she got up and was crying and hugging me and-.“ Xander stopped and Spike could see he was choking up.

He’d stopped pacing, but began again to give Xander a moment to compose himself. “Sounds like you did things just right then. This might work, yeah?”

There was a heavy sigh from behind him. “I hope so. Really I do.”

“Next step, mate, she’s gotta think I don’t know about this. Might make her drop her guard a bit more if she thinks she has one over on me.”

“I said that I would tell you she’s changed her mind and isn’t going to do it anymore.”

“Good thinking. Then she won’t question why you’re still coming around here. Better for Bit too. Less tension.”

Xander’s face fell into a sad smile. “God, the lies just get bigger. All this had better pay off.”
Spike passed behind the boy’s chair and gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder. “Doing the best we can. It’ll work.”

“You’ll stick it out with me won’t you?” There was a note of mild panic in Xander’s voice and Spike stopped behind him. “I mean, I know you said you would, but, you meant it right? I need you-, I need your help with this.”

Xander had twisted around and was staring at Spike over the back of the chair. If it was reassurance he was after, Spike had no problems giving it. “You got it. I told you I’d be here if you need anything and I keep my word. That’s a promise for you.”

Xander smiled in acknowledgement and settled back into the chair. Spike took in the more relaxed appearance and hoped that everything had gone as smoothly as Xander thought it had.

Part Eighteen
Spike stuck by Xander’s side as they wandered through the cemetery. Not having had a chance to talk in almost a week, neither fooled themselves that any patrol would actually be done, but they’d taken the weapons to keep up appearances. It was a quiet night, which worked out just fine as far as Spike was concerned.

He’d patiently waited for this day. If patiently could be defined as chain smoking, drinking a case of beer, and more than half a case of whiskey, while pacing new furrows into his crypt floor.

Tonight was the first time they’d been able to debrief since Xander had put their plan into action. He’d not made it to their regular mid week, nor Friday’s night out, instead deciding it more appropriate to spend time with Willow, convincing her of the authenticity of his new agreement. Spike thought that would be for the best too, but had been more than surprised at how he’d reacted to the quiet week.

He’d never felt as such a loose end, and that’s when the excessive drinking and smoking had begun. It was a way to kill the time. Patrolling may well have been more effective as a time filler, but it would mean he’d be away from the crypt and if Xander happened to call by, Spike wanted to be there for him. He told himself it was so that
he could get the information he needed, but after looking deep into the bottom of several empty Jack bottles, he begrudgingly admitted to himself it was because he missed the company.

It had been more than two months—maybe even three—that he and Xander had been following their routine. Spike’d had no idea how much of a habit it had become, how much he had relied on the boy to keep his thoughts on track, to keep him sane. He’d taken it for granted while they were out. Just a couple of guys having a beer and talking around the worries of the week. A few games of pool, a few rounds of patrol—all seemingly innocuous. But when he didn’t have that, when he had to fill the time himself, deal only with his own company, Spike realised how important a friend Xander had become. A good mate.

As they walked, there was the occasional bumping of arms, elbows, shoulders; something he might not have paid attention to before, but now Spike was conscious of the most likely non-accidental nature of this, he’d become more aware. It didn’t bother him— the warmth of humans had always had its appeal— but this was different, the contact with and proximity to a friend was very different to stealing the body heat from thrashing, writhing prey.
“Thought you might look a bit better,” Spike said, taking in the tired lines of Xander’s face. “Still look like shit though.”

“Yeah, thanks. This isn’t any easier, you know.”

“Not fending off her phone calls, no more pressure to join in the plan-.”

“No none of that, but I have to lie to her every time I see her. I have to pretend to be on board with this when I really hate every part of it, and it makes me feel sick when I think about what she’s going to be doing.”

Spike grabbed Xander’s elbow and they stopped walking. “Is it too much for you? You want to back out?”

Xander shook his head immediately. “No. Not at all. I just have to unwind a bit. This is good, this is what I need.”

Spike gave a sharp nod of acceptance, let him go and they moved on again. “So you want to tell me about what’s going on? If you’d rather not, that’s okay.” Spike seriously hoped he’d want to talk about it, after all he’d waited so long, trying to be patient, but failing miserably.

“No, I do. God, I need to off load. It’s, um, it’s not too interesting though.”
“Harris, you want to know what I’ve done this week? I’ve drunk enough to keep a small liquor store in business, smoked a forest-worth of tobacco and paced more miles in my crypt than I normally do in a month. Sadly, this is the highlight of my week.”

Xander stopped and stared. “Why? Haven’t you gone out? Haven’t you been patrolling?”

“Yeah, I went out a couple of times just before dawn yesterday and once other day. Been staying in mostly this week.”

Spike started walking again, but only a few steps when he realised Xander still hadn’t moved.

“You coming?”

“No. Why haven’t you been out? Is something wrong?”

The boy’s demanding stance took Spike by surprise. “I just said I went out a couple of times. What else am I meant to be bloody doing?”

Xander gave an exaggerated shrug. “Oh, I don’t know. Hunting, killing, maiming- all the things you normally do when we go out. Drinking, pool.”
Spike tried to ignore that and move them off again, but Xander remained where he was, eyebrows raised in question. “Well?”

“Bloody hell. If I went out, who was going to be there if you turned up, eh? Nobody, that’s who. What if it hadn’t worked and she’d turned you into a soddin’ frog or some such. Then you turn up on my doorstep, banging away and I’m out playing a bit of stick at the pub. How would that be after I promised to be there for you?”

“Wait. You’ve been staying in all week, in case I needed you?”

Spike snorted and looked away. “No, course not.”

Xander shook his head in confusion. “But, you just said-.”

“No, I didn’t. Let’s go find something to fight, yeah?”

Spike turned and headed off deeper into the cemetery, silently fuming at having made himself sound like a ponce. He hadn’t planned on an actual patrol tonight, but maybe a bit of a fight was in order; something might kick a bit of sense into his obviously empty head.

Xander didn’t immediately follow and Spike was about to stop when at last he heard the footsteps, and Xander fell in beside him. Spike strode through the dark, his attention divided between making sure Xander was close
by, and listening for something to kill. Soon the scent of fresh turned soil came to him and he turned quickly in that direction. “Over here,” he said and waved for Xander to follow.

They’d come to a row of new headstones, the center one boasting a large stone angel standing guard over a recently abandoned grave.

“Is it still around?” Xander asked.

“Not far, I can smell it. I think it’s just over there.” Spike pointed to a thick stand of trees not far off. “Just act like a victim.”

Xander snorted. “Not usually a problem.”

Spike rolled his eyes and was about to dispute that when there was a sudden rustling, and a new vampire, still with clods of soil clinging to its skin, burst from the cover. “Keep your guard up, mate, I’m taking this one.”

Spike made sure Xander had his stake at the ready, then turned and grinned at the fledge. “Let’s go. Let’s see how long you last.”

Spike danced around and positioned himself where he was facing Xander and could keep an eye on him while he fought. The fledge was no challenge, really, but the
fight served a purpose. Spike hoped it would put some distance between him and his outburst about staying in and waiting for the last week. That was rather more information than he’d intended to share.

The fight was nothing special, but Spike enjoyed it nonetheless. That was until the fledge flew spinning through the air after a solid blow to its head, and spotted Xander standing by, watching. It laughed as it got up and flung itself towards him, knocking Xander to the ground and immediately lowered its fangs to his throat.

“No,” Spike roared, and charged towards Xander and the fledge, his face shifting as he ran. The urgent, swelling feeling in his chest pushing him on. Nothing would touch the boy.

Xander was yelling and pushing with his off-hand, trying to get an opening for the stake he held in his other. His head was thrashing back and forth, making it harder for the vampire getting its teeth in.

Spike grabbed the vampire by the back of its jacket and hauled it off, tossing it away from Xander. He wasted no time in going after it, and the fledge didn’t stand a chance. There were no coherent thoughts in his mind other than to destroy this thing that dared to touch Xander. Snarling and growling all the while, he beat the
fledge to a bloody mess before he tore at its head, dust flying as it came off in his hand.

Before the dust had even settled, Spike was by Xander’s side, pulling him to his feet. “Did it get you?” he asked, as he checked Xander over thoroughly and let his face slide back.

“Um, no, I-, I don’t think so.” Xander stood still, his heart racing as Spike got close, scenting him for fresh blood, not prepared to take Xander’s word for it.

“Here,” Spike said, running a finger over small scratch on Xander’s neck and growling deep in his throat. The fledge had drawn blood. “Sorry, I was too damned slow.”

Xander slapped a hand to his throat and looked appraisingly at the tiny spot of blood on his fingers. “Spike, no, I’m fine, just a bit winded. It knocked the breath out of me for a minute. But I’m okay, I promise. Come on, let’s go.”

Spike gripped his shoulders and turned him around, checking one last time. “Sure?”

“Positive.” Xander sighed, then nodded to the small pile of dust on the pathway. “Better than him. I haven’t seen you fight like that for a long time.”
“Yeah, well, bastard asked for it. He shouldn’t have touched what’s m-.” Spike caught himself, surprised by the degree of the possessiveness the attack had triggered in him. “He shouldn’t have done that.”

“I guess not.” Xander nodded slowly. “Thankyou for that. Saved me again”

Spike realised he still had hold of Xander. He squeezed once then let go. “Drink? My place?”

“God, yes.”

Xander fell in step beside Spike as they began walking again. They were silent for a long while until Xander cleared his throat and spoke. “She doesn’t turn people into frogs, you know.”

“But she would if she could.”

“Yeah I guess.” Xander gave a soft laugh. “Willow hasn’t told me anything yet, about the spell.”

Spike didn’t know if Xander had forgotten the thread of their last conversation, was just humouring him, or was maybe trying to get past what Spike had just done. He didn’t really care either way, so long as they moved on. He sighed with relief, glad that Xander wasn’t going to
push him anymore or question the nature of his attack on the fledge. “She still keeping mum?”

“I thought it might be a bit obvious if I just went in and asked about it outright. You know, it might be best if I worked up to it, just let her tell me in her own time.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a good plan. You go rushing in there asking for all the gory details, she might get suspicious and just clam up altogether. Good thinking, mate.”

From the corner of his eye, Spike caught Xander’s small smile at the praise and smiled himself.

“All she’s told me so far is that they know what they’re doing. They’ve made a composite spell from a few different books, so we aren’t just going to be able to look it up and find the list of ingredients. We’ll definitely have to wait till she tells me the specifics.”

“And in the meantime, she’s happy to have you hanging about? She doesn’t mind that you’re still coming to my place on the odd occasion? Not feeling threatened?”

“Honestly, I don’t think she realises that we’re, ah, that we, um, hang out as much as we have been.”
“How so?” They’d not made it obvious, but Spike was sure that the others had noticed.

“She knows that we have movie nights with Dawn, but like Dawnie said, they haven’t been paying her much attention lately, so I doubt she’s ever mentioned that we watch movies without her too.”

“Hmm, could be right.”

“I think she knows we’ve been for a drink once or twice, but most times we go, it’s not from the Magic Box, we just meet up somewhere, whether it’s the bar or your place.”

“Suppose there’s no way she would know then, is there? Well that’s one bloody thing on our side, at least.”

“Does it really make that much difference?”

“Yeah, mate, it does. She’s going to have it in the back of her mind that you’ve got no one else to lean on, no sounding board. She’ll be thinking as far as friends go, that she’s it for you. But she’s wrong and that gives you an advantage don’t it?”

Xander was quiet for a long while. He was staring at Spike with such an odd expression that Spike ran that last idea back through his head to see if he’d managed to
offend the boy somehow. No, nothing there that he could object to. Spike waited, sure Xander would clear things up; he often did, given time.

“No. Yeah. No.” Xander shook his head as though to clear it. “Um, you’re right, yeah. She does think she’s my only friend. She’s wrong.”

Bingo. “She’s dead wrong, mate.” Spike heard Xander’s heart rate increase and again he felt a self-satisfied smile twitching at his lips. It was giving him an unusually good feeling each time he triggered these reactions in the boy— the pulse, the blushes and the smiles.

“So, um, anyway, that’s all I got from her this week.”

“It’s a good start.”

Certainly the admission of friendship was not what could be considered a giant breakthrough for Xander, but still it was a big deal. And like typical blokes, it seemed they would take a big step, get over it and continue like nothing happened. Spike had no issues following Xander’s lead.

**Part Nineteen**

Xander was already sitting at their table when Spike arrived at the bar on Tuesday night. He’d hardly expected
the boy to be there and was preparing himself for another week of pacing and waiting, but had come just in case. The bright smile he got as soon as Xander saw him was reward enough for his gamble.

“Hey!”

Spike put the drinks down on the table and returned his smile. “Good day by the looks of it.”

“You could say that. In fact, if you did, you’d be damn right.”

Spike tried not to laugh at the warm feeling Xander’s mood gave him. It had been a very long time since he’d seen Xander so animated, and he didn’t remember it having this effect on him last time.

“So you gonna share, or you just gonna sit there grinning like a loon?”

“Thought I’d grin for a bit, then try out some cackles and move right in to gloating.”

“Sounds like you have a plan there. Alright, have at it then, get it over with.” Spike sat back and crossed his legs.
“Nah, I’ll just tell you instead.” Xander reached for his beer and swallowed half of it down, laughing softly as he wiped a trickle from his chin. Spike watched Xander’s fingers as he carefully licked the drips off. He did have very big hands. Very big. “So you wanna hear or not? Spike?”

Spike realised the boy had still been talking. “Yeah, right, mate. Go ahead.”

“I have the list of ingredients.”

“No shit?” Spike said with a slow smile.

“Shit-free,” Xander said and pulled a piece of paper from his pocket.

“And how did you get hold of that?”

“Willow came and had lunch with me today. She wanted me to build her a stand for a specific sized bowl. She had a sketch of it in a book and the ingredients were right there on the next page.”

Spike frowned. “How do you know they’re the ones for this spell?”

“I asked,” Xander said with a laugh. “I know I said I would wait a bit longer, but I couldn’t pretend I hadn’t seen it,
so I just asked and she said that’s what they were and told me about them.”

“So you wrote them down, then?”

“No, I had to go inside and make a copy of her sketch so I copied the list at the same time.”

Spike held out his hand and Xander passed him the paper. There were a few regular herbs and crystals that he recognised, some liquids that sounded familiar but then a long stretch of things he’d never heard of. “Right then. Some of these things we can forget about, they’re so common she’ll be able to pick them up anywhere. We need to find out what these other things are, see what we can do about that.”

“Spike, I think this might be it. I think maybe we did it.”

Spike reached out and clapped him on the back. “Think you just might have, mate. Good for you.”

Xander sat back with his drink and crossed his legs. It wasn’t anything like the defensive posture of the past, this was a man who was oozing relief and confidence. It showed in the light in his eyes, the creases in his cheeks from the huge smile, the easy slant of his shoulders. He was genuinely happy.
“We need to get this started as soon as we can. We’ve gotta find out where all this stuff comes from, what it does; see if we can stop her getting a few of the parts together. Then we can-.”

Spike held a hand up to stop him. “Steady on there, we’ve gotta find a computer first, and it’s gotta be somewhere she wouldn’t find us. We need that bloody internet thing too.”

“Magic Box? Giles has a computer behind the counter.”

“Not a great idea, mate. She can easily see what you’ve been doing there, can’t she?”

“Right, right.” Xander’s leg was bouncing, his foot tapping, not in agitation as it normally did, but in obvious excitement. “Oh! Work. On the site there’s an empty office, one of the management just left and they haven’t replaced him yet, we can get in there. Oh, but there’s alarms and locks, maybe cameras.”

Spike just looked at him. As if those things were an issue. “Cell phone?”

Xander frowned, but handed his phone over to Spike.
“Cheers.” Spike quickly dialled a number and waited for the voice at the other end to finish its cheery greeting. “Clem, it’s me, I got a job for you if you have time.”

“Spike, hi! How are you buddy, haven’t seen you for a while. Hey, we should totally get together for a game soon. I know this guy, well, he’s not a guy as much as he’s an Eerp’ou demon, and technically, I’m not even sure if he’s a he, but, benefit of the doubt. Anyway, he has the most delicious, tender kit-.”

Spike could tell from Xander’s bulging eyes, that he was picking up every word. He cut Clem off before the description became too detailed.

“Great idea, Clem, but right now, I need a bit of help. Need you to clear the way for me.”

“Oh, right, sure thing. Address?”

Spike held the phone out while Xander rattled off the address and the details of the building. “You get that, Clem?”

“Yep, surely did. I can have you in there tomorrow night, say anytime after ten, that okay?”
Spike looked questioningly at Xander, who nodded happily. “That will be just fine thanks, mate. I owe you one.”

“Um, no, Spike, you owe me several baskets full,” Clem said. Then his voice dropped deeper and became more gravelly. “But that’s okay, I know where you live.”

Spike sighed and rolled his eyes. “Sorry, mate, still not scary.”

“Darn it. Alright, I’ll keep practising.”

“Yeah, you do that. Meanwhile don’t forget to open that place up for me, yeah?”

“Consider it done.”

Spike flipped the phone closed and handed it back to Xander. “And we’re in.”

Xander raised his almost empty glass and tipped it towards Spike. “Nice job.”

Spike tilted his too, before draining it all and slamming the glass down. “Why don’t you take that goofy smile over to the bar and get us the next round.”

“Hey, it’s not goofy, it’s relieved. Happy even. This is good. Very good.”
“You’ll get no argument from me, mate.”

Xander grinned and headed for the bar. Spike watched him go and shook his head with a small laugh. The boy’s mood was infectious. So long they’d sat here in this bar and grieved separately, then mourned together, then reminisced at length. It was unusual to be here with Xander so hyped. Not unpleasant in the slightest, and Spike was grateful he got to share the good feelings.

Two more glasses hit the table then Xander threw himself back into his seat. “So, what do you want to do tonight? Pool, patrol or movie?”

“All that energy you got there, I say we might need a good patrol.”

Xander grinned again, and Spike swore it got wider each time. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

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Spike couldn’t help but laugh at the way Xander went about their patrol. He all but bounced- leaping over graves, chatting away like they were on a picnic, all the while wearing that enormous smile that Spike didn’t seem to be getting sick of. Xander rushed them down paths, and through trees, looking for some outlet and keeping up a steady stream of one sided conversation.
If he didn’t know better, Spike would say the boy had been taking something chemical and recreational. He knew he hadn’t, firstly because it was Xander, and secondly because Spike would be able to smell it and detect the difference in his heartbeat.

As he followed, the thought crept into his mind that this was Xander Harris he was thinking about, Xander Harris’s heartbeat and scent he was so familiar with. That thought floated about for a while, looking for connections, and finally found some. It joined itself up with the warm feeling Xander’s laughter and smiles brought about. It coupled itself with the memory of the heat from the boy’s touch and the anxiety Spike had felt spending a week on his own waiting. It twisted around the possessiveness and protectiveness towards the boy that had been gradually increasing.

Spike’s laughter died away. His smile disappeared. No. This was all wrong. It must just be a misfiring of his undead neurons, or whatever the hell was still functioning in there. A reaction to the knowledge that Harris was feeling a bit of attraction. Just a result of all the worry about a friend. That was all.

He made a conscious effort to redirect the snowballing thought, to bring some reason back. It was Xander Harris.
Not that far out of childhood. Still scarred and hurting from the loss of a friend, and the loss of a lover. He may well be confused, attaching himself to Spike because Spike had been there for him; supported him through the worst of the recovery. It wasn’t real what the boy was feeling and what he thought he was beginning to feel himself. It couldn’t be.

Transference and projection, that’s what was going on here. All just another form of fallout from the slayer’s death. That was Spike’s fervent hope anyway. The last thing either of them needed right now was to be complicating things with over-exaggerated feelings. It was just the newness of their friendship and the intensity of the situation that had driven them to it. It would all settle down in time, once they were comfortable with their new alliance. That’s what Spike would tell himself, and keep telling himself till he believed it.

Spike pushed away the thoughts that threatened to overturn his denial, put his amused face back in place and focused on Xander. He was still dancing about, talking to nobody in particular, looking like it was the best day of his life. Spike supposed it was the best day of his life- since they’d lost the slayer, anyway.
“Oi! You want to make a bit less noise, mate? You’ll have every bloody monster in here on your tail if you’re not careful.”

“Bring ‘em on!” Xander shouted back over his shoulder.

“Yeah, that’s all well and good, but once they’re here, who has to take them out?”

“Okay, yeah, I see your point. But, you know I’ll be here for moral support right? Oh, can it be moral support if there’s killing? Cause really, that’s not so much with the morals is it? Maybe I can be a cheer squad? No, that makes me think of miniskirts and tight sweaters and I don’t think-.”

“Harris!” Spike yelled, trying to cover his smile at how familiar the ridiculous ranting sounded. It had been a long while since he’d heard the like, too long in fact.

“What say, we give the patrol a miss tonight, yeah? I don’t think you’re in a fit state to be concentrating on staying alive. Bit too scattered.”

“You think? I suppose you’re right,” Xander said, finally slowing down and walking alongside Spike. “I’m just so amped, you know? This might be it. Tomorrow we might have the answer to end this whole nightmare. We can all
just get on with things then; get everyone back to a new kind of normal.”

“Here’s hoping, mate.”

Xander had calmed down a little, but still talked all the way back to the crypt. He pondered the ingredients list, and what the items could be, asked about Clem and how he would get them in. He was still chatting when Spike handed him a beer and pushed him down into a recliner to start a new box set.

They watched a few episodes of an old series Spike had lifted from the video store, Xander having finally fallen quiet towards the end of the first disc. Spike was in two minds about the silence he’d half wished for. He had to work harder to keep unwanted thoughts at bay and keep his focus on the television, but at least he didn’t have to work so hard to decipher Xander’s machine-gun conversation.

It was with mixed feelings that he waved Xander off at the gates just before midnight, having made arrangements to meet him at the site on Wednesday night. Watching the taillights disappear, Spike sighed, then took the long way back to his crypt, distracting himself for as long as possible with a good fight or three. Just before dawn, he patched his cut and bruised hands
up, emptied another bottle of whiskey and hoped that he’d worn himself out enough that today, he would sleep the sleep of the dead, just as was meant to be.

Part Twenty

The fights hadn’t helped. Nor had the half bottle of Jack. Spike tossed and turned for hours, not able to get to sleep for the images and thoughts that ran relentlessly through his head. All those thoughts telling him things he didn’t want to acknowledge. Things that couldn’t be true. Things that would royally screw with a good friendship. No matter how much he didn’t want it, they nagged at him. Eventually, he’d given up trying to sleep, climbed the ladder and opened another case of whiskey. He’d not bothered counting after the second bottle, and each had met the same end- as a pile of shattered glass in the corner of his crypt.

Spike woke on the floor, well after the sun had gone down, an empty bottle in his hand. The smell of stale cigarette ash was sharp in his nose and, as he lifted his
head, the butts strewn around him came into focus. He may have a bit of housekeeping to do, but at least he’d managed to knock himself out for the day. It had been a thankfully dreamless sleep, but the thoughts he’d drunk himself into unconsciousness over, were nudging at the edges of his mind, and he knew he would have to deal sooner rather than later. The drinking hadn’t helped. But like he’d once told Xander, way back when, nor had it hurt. Just paved the way for a good bit of avoidance for a time.

Back on his feet, Spike gave the place a quick clean up and opened the door to let the fresh air cleanse away the seedy bar smell. It was a consideration for Xander, more than a desire for cleanliness or order, and Spike swore softly at himself as he realised how automatic these things were becoming. It was apparent that there wasn’t going to be enough whiskey in the world to make him put off addressing his feelings.

Still, it could be set aside for tonight. He had an appointment to keep. Spike finished dressing, grabbed his cigarettes and coat and headed out to meet Xander at the site. He didn’t take any weapons, but if he came across something on the way that needed killing, well then, he was fully prepared to work out a few issues and would rather do it bare-handed
It was still early when Spike arrived, so he perched on a low wall and waited. Sitting proved to be too much, so again, Spike found himself pacing and smoking. There was only one left in the pack by the time Xander arrived. Not that he’d be needing them now, he’d tried to cut back while Xander and Dawn were around. Another bloody concession for humans.

Spike had worked himself up again, and was in a less than good mood when Xander arrived. No matter how the boy’s cheerful smile and wave warmed him, he was disgusted with himself for not realising sooner how his feeling had been shifting. He should never have allowed either of them to get to this point. There was too much on their plates right now.

“Hey!” Xander called as he jogged down the sidewalk. Spike saw his car parked further up the road, well away from the site entrance. “Your friend get this sorted out for us?”

Spike gave him a sharp nod and pulled at the chain that had been looped loosely around the gates. “Clem’s one of your more reliable demons, if he says he’ll do it then you can bet it’s done.” Spike realised he must have
sounded a bit more abrupt than he’d intended when he saw Xander put his hands up defensively.

“Not questioning the demon here. I was just asking.”

Spike made an effort to soften his tone. “Yeah, sorry. Didn’t sleep well.”

Xander looked at him carefully as they pushed the main gate open just enough to squeeze through. “Why? Something wrong?”

“Nothing much, just got things on my mind.”

Whether Xander misunderstood, or deliberately changed tack, Spike didn’t know, but was glad of it anyway. “Yeah, I guess we should be working out what to do when Willow finds out what we’ve done to her spell.”

“Gotta see what there is we can do first, yeah?” Spike said as he put the length of chain back in place.

Xander led the way to a portable building on the side of the site. The door was unlocked when they tried it, just as the front gate had been. Xander glanced at a bank of monitoring equipment just inside the door. “Security’s all switched off. He’s good.”

“That he is.”
They walked down a short corridor and entered a small dark room. It was bare but for the basic office furniture and computer. “Here we go,” Xander said, as he switched on a small desk lamp and hit the power on the computer. He pulled up two chairs to the desk and they sat waiting while it booted. “Okay, you read me the list and I’ll type it in.”

They went through the list, one by one, discounting the more common ingredients that were readily available and easy to replace. Xander had also entered the names of some of the other things Spike thought he’d recognised, and they were also able to cross those off the list. While not exactly commonplace, they would not be difficult for the witches to find again.

Xander pointed to the last few items on the page. “Now these could be a bit harder to find, but I think we should be able to get enough information on them.”

“You know where to look?” Spike wondered if these things would be too obscure for Xander to locate.

“I’ve helped Willow source things plenty of times, Giles too when he’s needed help in the shop. There’re a few databases and a couple of online stores we can try,” Xander explained as he typed. “Even if we can’t buy and destroy the things she needs, at least we might be able
to uncover a bit more information about what she’s doing. What kind of spell she’s made.”

“So let’s try this first thing here, the Aseoni Goblets.” Spike watched Xander enter the phrase into several sites and come up blank each time. “Right, next thing then – Caxxanul Pestle.”

Again Xander entered the phrase into the databases, and again there were no hits. “This is weird. Giles swears by these sites, I know he deals with them all the time. There should be at least a reference to these things, even if they’re out of stock, or so rare that there’s only one.”

“But we’re getting nothing at all?”

“Big fat nothing.”

Spike sighed. “Let’s try the rest of these, maybe something else comes up.” Xander passed the keyboard over, and Spike entered the rest of the items, with the same result.

“Huh!” Xander said, leaning back in the chair and folding his arms behind his head. “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“Maybe it’s the spelling?” Spike offered.
“Could be,” he mused. “But other times I’ve done this, it’s worked off an approximation and it offers things with similar spelling. This time it’s just throwing up an ‘item not found’ message. It’s like these things don’t even exist.”

“Let’s just run them all through again, double check before we give up.”

Xander rubbed his hands over his face. “I’m not giving up. Not now.”

Spike had no intention of doing that either, but he wanted the option out there in case things were getting too much for the boy, he was the one with the biggest part in this after all. “Then let’s try this one more time and if it doesn’t work we’ll come up with our next move, yeah?”

They went back through the list methodically checking each item in each site. For all their care and caution, they ended up with the same result.

Xander sat staring at their fruitless search results on the monitor. “Let me just put them into a regular search engine, surely some reference will show up, even if it’s just mentioned in a text somewhere.”
Spike scowled at the paper as though it were deliberately holding out on him. “Worth a try, not much else we can do here.”

Again, Xander searched the obscure terms, but none were recognised. He sighed in frustration. “What does this mean?”

“Well, number one, she’s found a spell so complex, that the things she needs to cast it just aren’t available through the regular channels.”

“Yeah, that’s possible I guess,” Xander conceded.

Spike had a number two, but he wasn’t sure the boy would like it. It opened up all kinds of issues between him and his witch friend. He weighed up the likelihood though, that his second thought was right and came to the conclusion that it was the closest to the truth. “Possible, but unlikely. Number two, you aren’t going to like.”

“There’s nothing about this I like, so if you have an idea, please just tell me.”

Spike could see Xander steeling himself, so he pressed on. “Number two is that maybe this is a load of rot. I wonder if maybe the witch hasn’t had some suspicions and tossed you a red herring.”
“You mean this list is fake?” Xander looked sceptical.

“I mean most of that list could well be fake. You said yourself those search things never acted like that before. And if these soddin’ things existed there would have to be reference to them somewhere on the internet.”

Xander still appeared doubtful “You think she made this up and let me see it?”

“I hope she didn’t, mate.” Spike shrugged. “But I think she may have done just that.”

“Why? Why would she lie to me like that?”

“Ah, Harris. What is it you’re doing with her? Trying to pull one over on her. Maybe she’s just picked up on that.”

Xander thumped his feet on the floor as he thrust himself out of the chair and away from the computer. “God, I knew I would be no good at this. You should have done it, you’re a great liar.”

Spike sneered. “I’ll take that as a compliment then, yeah?”
“Sorry, but you are, especially when it comes to people you don’t like. You can manipulate them, con them. It’s what you do.”

Spike shifted in his chair, uncomfortable at Xander’s negative, but accurate assessment of him. He’d hoped he’d changed a lot over the past few months, he’d thought he had, and was surprised at how the boy’s summation stung. “All that aside, she wouldn’t have believed me for one second.”

“Maybe not.” Xander agreed.

“Look, there’s a chance I’m wrong. I might be shifty and underhanded but I’m not always right. I may just be reading too much into this.”

Xander had made a circuit of the room and now came back to take his seat. He took the piece of paper from Spike’s hand and examined it closely. “She told me it was the list of things she needed to do the spell, to bring Buffy back. Those were nearly her exact words. If this isn’t the list, then that means she doesn’t believe me and she knows what I’m doing. If that’s the case, then why hasn’t she just come right out and said it? Why do this? I know I’m lying to her too, but the reason behind it is completely different.”
Spike hated that he’d had to put the thought in Xander’s head. He’d been so confident and sure of himself; he’d been happy. Now he was slumped, dejected, defeated. “Don’t let it get to you like that. We’re not finished here.”

“What else can we do?” Xander waved a hand at the computer. “I don’t know where else to look.”

“Not on there, but I have another card up my sleeve. You’re not the only one with magical contacts.”

“What do you mean?” Xander began to pick up; a small look of hope crossed his face and he sat taller.

Spike took the paper back. “We can make a copy of this, I’ll give it to Clem and have him ask around. If these things exist, he’ll be able to find out for us.”

“What is this guy?” Xander’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “He does everything.”

“He’s just a good bloke, honest and reliable, and he has a lot of contacts because of it. People don’t say no to him often.”

“Alright, if you think it’s worth a try. I’ll copy this, then we can go.” Xander pushed himself out of the seat, grabbed the list and disappeared into another room.
Even though he would drop it off later, Spike seriously doubted that Clem would uncover anything that they couldn’t. It wouldn’t hurt to try though, but the exercise was mainly to help Xander. He’d looked so hurt when Spike suggested that Willow had fooled him, Spike wanted to offer some other solution, ease the pain.

Thoughts about why he wanted to do that so badly flitted into his head again. Time was coming where he would have to address that, bring it to the fore and give it a good seeing to. Sitting this close to the boy, alone in a dark room was definitely not the place. Maybe tonight it was time to ease off the booze and face the things he’d pushed aside.

Part Twenty-One

Spike’d had Xander let him out on the other side of town and he’d walked the short distance to the old house where he knew he would find Clem up to his floppy ears in kitten poker. The boy had wanted to come in with him, but given his demon attracting tendencies, Spike thought
it better for him to just head home. It had nothing to do with possessiveness and territoriality, and everything to do with protecting him from potential attacks. That’s what Spike told himself anyway. Any time now he expected to believe it.

Spike went around to the back of the house and stood at the open door, sizing up the room, until he was noticed.

“Hey, Spike. Come on in.” Clem waved to him from a seat at the poker table. “We’re nearly done, but you can sit in if you like.”

“You gonna spot me?” Spike asked Clem as he glanced around at the varied demons at the table. He recognised a few faces, none of which seemed pleased to see him.

“Are you kidding? You still owe me.” Clem pointed to the basket at his feet. “Any time you’re ready to pay up, there’s the deposit box.”

“Tabby’s in the mail.”

“Yeah, yeah, save it for someone else,” Clem said with another good natured chuckle. “Let me finish this hand and be right with you. Grab a drink.”

Spike opened the fridge and pulled out a bottle of beer. He hoisted himself onto the counter and waited while
Clem played out his hand. A few discreet nods and shakes of Spike’s head soon helped Clem win the hand. He cleared the table into his own basket as he declared the evening over.

The other demons grumbled and looked suspiciously at Spike as they left. He gave their glares back ten-fold, effectively reminding them that the chip was no protection for them.

Clem laughed. “So, you got in alright? No problems?”

“Not a one, thanks, mate. Like I said, I owe-.”

“Save it, I won’t hold my breath.”

As soon as the last one had left, Spike took a seat opposite Clem. “Need another favour from you.”

“Oh, sure, sure, what can I do?” Clem asked eagerly.

Definitely a good bloke, this one. Never asked unnecessary questions, never refused a job. Spike handed him the list. “All those things we’ve circled, I need to know what they are and where we can get them. ASAP, mate, if you can.”

Clem looked it over and frowned, an expression only barely discernable in his myriad creases. “I know some of
these things, but others? Not a clue. I’ll have to ask around. I’ll need a couple of days for this. That okay?”

“Only just. Time’s an issue on this one.”

Clem held the paper to his nose curiously and sniffed. “Smells like humans. You working with the slayer and her people on something again?”

“Could say that. Just one of the slayer’s people though.”

Clem’s face broke into a big grin. “Oh! Only one? Which one? Let me guess. Um, the red-head?” Spike shook his head in disgust rather than as an answer, but Clem was oblivious. “They have another witch don’t they? You working with her, maybe?”

He bit back an impatient growl. “No, mate, it’s not-.”

“Not her. Okay, so who else do they have? That vengeance demon’s gone now right, so that leaves-, oh my! The slayer? You’re working with the slayer? She is pretty, bit too smooth for my liking.”

Spike worked hard to keep himself calm. It wasn’t Clem’s fault. He had no idea the slayer was gone, same as the rest of the demon population, thanks to regular outings of the bot. And Clem was just a romantic at heart, odd for a demon, but then it took all kinds. This was just
another of his ham-fisted attempts to have Spike ‘hook up’ with someone, as he often put it.

“Okay, I can tell from that face I’ve hit a sore spot.” Clem nodded wisely. “So, it’s not the slayer then. That narrows it down. Let’s see who else there is.”

“Bloody hell Clem, I’m working with the boy. We’re researching something and that’s it.”

Clem sat patiently while Spike threw himself out of the chair, got another beer and sat heavily at the table again. “A little touchy there, Spike. Did I hit a nerve?”

Spike growled low in his chest as he tipped the bottle up to his lips.

“Looks like I did.” Clem held his hands up in apology. “Sorry. Anything you want to talk about?”

Spike shook his head. Not a bloody thing- Spike didn’t want to acknowledge it himself, let alone air it in public.

“Spike, you sure there’s nothing you want to get off your chest? I haven’t seen you this wound up for a good long while.”

The back door swung open again behind them and a smallish, grey coloured demon began hunting around the
kitchen distractedly, speaking at a pace that would rival an auctioneer. As he spoke, Spike felt a tingling through his head, not exactly unpleasant, but very unwelcome.

“Oh, he’s just wallowing because he’s trying to pretend he hasn’t got a *thing* for someone— I can’t see who— but he thinks it’s just a knee-jerk reaction to the way *that* person feels about him, which he thinks is *another* knee-jerk reaction to some big event that they’re both still feeling the effects of— I can’t see what *that* is either— but you know it’s not *really* a knee-jerk thing at all, they both actually—.”

The tingling in his head grew stronger and Spike felt his face shift. A low rumbling began in his chest as he dived from the seat, reaching for the startled demon. He only made it halfway across the room when he was stopped mid-flight.

“Whoa, there Spike. He didn’t mean to do that. Calm down, buddy.” Clem had a hand on his chest and was pushing him back, Spike finally noticed the pressure and backed off, shaking his head. “You back with me now, Spike? You okay?”

“What the fuck was that?” Spike bellowed. “What the fuck did you do in my head?”
The Initiative had gotten into his head and left their calling card; the witch had gotten into his head the night Buffy died. Spike wouldn’t stand for any more invasions of the privacy of his mind.

“’I’m sorry, man, I’m sorry.’” Tremors of fear rippled through the demon’s voice as he picked himself up off the floor, where he’d fallen in his rush to get away from Spike. “Really sorry, I couldn’t help it.”

“Spike this is Garry. He’s an Ankfrael demon. They’re, um, empathic, for want of a better label, but it’s more than that. Garry here just got his, ah, skills last week when he had his birthday. He can’t quite control it yet, right Garry?”

“Yeah, gets me in all kinds of shit, like now.” Garry was still backing away towards the door, looking frantically around the kitchen. “I lost my car keys again, Clem. Damn it all, this new empathy gig does nothing to help me find my keys.”

“Check the fruit bowl, Garry?” Clem asked, pointedly looking at the shining bunch of keys sitting in the otherwise empty bowl.

“Oh, right, yeah. Safe keeping, I remember now.” Garry inched towards the door, not taking his eyes off Spike for
a second. “Hey, listen, man. I’m really sorry about that. I can’t control it yet and, well, you’re just oozing with feelings. You shouldn’t be so down about all that though, it’s gonna work out just-.”

Spike’s snarled as his head began to tingle again and Clem rushed to push Garry out the door, slamming and locking it behind him.

“Don’t be too hard on him Spike, he’s young and he really can’t stop it yet.”

Spike sat down again and massaged his head. Not that it was painful, but just in an attempt to rid himself of the feeling of the intrusion. “Nobody’s soddin’ business what’s in my head.”

Clem sat down opposite and nodded in agreement. “True, and he’ll learn how to keep a lid on it, eventually.”

Spike finished his beer then indicated the list in front of Clem, in what he knew was most likely a fruitless attempt at avoiding Garry’s revelations. “I can leave that with you then, yeah?”

“You don’t want to talk?” Clem looked disappointed. “Garry made a pretty big point back there, were you even listening?”
“Course I was bloody listening. And, no. I do not want to talk about any of it.”

“Okay. It’s just that it’s not like you to repress something like that, is it?”

Spike sat back, crossed his legs and folded his arms tight across his chest. “Didn’t I just say I don’t want to discuss this?”

“You did, sure, but it doesn’t look like you’re leaving, see?” Clem got up and went to the fridge, returning with another two beers. “So I figured maybe you do want to talk, you just don’t want to want to talk. Did that make sense? I think it did.”

Spike snorted. “Company I been keeping, yeah, it made sense,” he mumbled. “Doesn’t mean it’s true though, right?”

“Sure, right, yeah.” Clem nodded and snatched at the piece of paper in front of him. “So we can just sit here then, and instead maybe talk about this list and what it’s for, who wrote it, why they’re looking for a-, a Scabbard of Kelsia?- whatever the heck that is.”

Bloody demon. Clem never asked questions. He did things quite happily on a need to know basis. If he was pulling this trick now, then he was going to be hard to
put off. Spike wasn’t completely sure if he wanted to put him off either. “Yeah? You’d do that even after I just helped you rake in a full basket of Persians. Persians, Clem!”

Clem looked longingly at the mewling basket under the table. “Hey, buddy. You did me a favour, I was just trying to give a little something back. You look like a fella with a lot on his mind and maybe a bit on his heart too. I wanna help, it’s what I do.”

Spike let his face relax out of the hard scowl he’d been wearing since Garry had left. Thanks to the inexperienced Ankfrael, not only did Spike have the very thing he’d been trying his damnedest to ignore thrown in his face, but Clem now knew exactly what that was. Knowing him as well as Spike did, it was unlikely Clem would let it go any time soon. He would continue making it his mission to set Spike on the path to true-. True what? This wasn’t love. Not a chance. This was just a friendship that had gotten out of hand.

He sighed. “That Garry bloke has it all wrong.”

“Nope.”

Spike glared at Clem. “He bloody well does.”

“Nope.”
“What do you mean, no?”

Clem leaned forward cautiously. “Spike, Garry is young. He can’t stop himself saying those things, almost doesn’t even realise he’s doing it. But I guarantee you that everything he says is two hundred percent true.”

“Two hundred?” Spike rolled his eyes. “Real believable, mate.”

“Yep two hundred. One hundred because everything he tells you about yourself is true, and another hundred because everything he tells you about the people close to you is true.”

“Fuck,” Spike snarled. He didn’t know much about these things, but Clem was one of the few people he trusted implicitly. If Clem said it was so, you could take that to the bank. Which meant, as much as he wished otherwise, everything Garry had read was accurate.

“Sounds like you aren’t too happy about what he saw?”

Spike sighed. “You could say that, mate.”

“So, this is the friend of the slayer? The one you’re working with on this?” Clem held up the list.

“Yeah, that’s the one.”
“Garry says you have a thing for him.” At Spike’s sharp look, Clem held up his hands. “Hey, his words, not mine. Shoot the messenger, not the innocent bystander.”

Spike drank slowly from his bottle, then spent a good while picking at the label with his thumbnail. He ran Garry’s words back through his head. *Not a knee-jerk reaction, they both-* something. He’d been sure that the feelings he’d sensed in Xander were nothing more than a reflex, just a result of having spent so much time together getting past Buffy. A bit like a rebound, and no good ever came of the rebound.

The small amount of time Spike’d given over to his own thoughts had led him to one conclusion. He’d been unduly influenced by the boy’s chemical and physical reactions to him, and like Xander’s feelings, they had little substance and would soon fade.

Going by Garry’s evaluation though, Spike had been wrong. But who was to say it had to go that way. Just because Garry had seen that path, didn’t mean he couldn’t change things. He had no desire to lead the boy into something that could be completely disastrous. And if a slayer and a vampire was a bad idea, then a human and a vampire, no, a slayer’s human groupie and a vampire was just as bad.
“No saying that what he saw will come to be,” Spike ventured.

Clem shrugged. “But it will come to be. He sees the path things will take. It’s not just a possibility you can influence; he tells the outcome of what he feels. With Garry, it’s set.”

Spike drained his bottle and stood up, rather more roughly that he meant to and his chair toppled over. “Not this time, mate. He’s got this one all wrong. I’ll not drag the boy into something like this. He’s got too much on his plate to be dealing with the likes of me.”

“What do you mean, the likes of you? What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m a fucking demon, Clem. He’s a breakable human. You should have seen what I did to a fledge that touched him on patrol. I saw that thing going for his throat and I lost control of myself.”

“You hurt him?”

Spike frowned and took up a circuit of the room, lighting a cigarette as he paced. “No, I didn’t hurt him. I lost my head, beat the fledge to a pulp, then tore it’s head off, while he laid on the ground with nothing but a scratch on his throat.”
“And then your friend ran away, screaming in terror from your monstrous antics?” Clem said, with knowing smile.

“No. He just kept out of the way like he usually does.”

“So he didn’t mind?”

“Never does.”

“Never? So he’s seen this before and he still hangs out with you?”

“That was different,” Spike said, pointing with his bottle. “This time it was because of him. I beat that fledgling because it touched him. What would happen if he really got hurt? The demon counts him as a possession. Now, I won’t fool myself on this, I count him as a good mate, but it’s just too dangerous for him to be any more involved with something like that.”

Clem looked incredulous. “So, you’re not even going to give him the choice then?”

“How can he make a balanced choice right now? He’s still hurting over Bu-, ah, his girlfriend leaving.”

“Oh, he was the one who was living with the vengeance demon, right? Yes, sounds like he has a real aversion to demons.”
Spike rolled his eyes. “She wasn’t a demon then.”

“So? You’re not a demon now.” Clem waved a finger at Spike’s smooth features.

“I’m always a demon, it’s just a matter of how much control I have. The other night, I had none. Anything could have happened.”

“But it wasn’t the first time, and nothing’s happened to him so far.”

Spike growled in frustration. “Bloody hell, Clem. Why are you pushing me? What is this to you?”

“Sorry, I thought we were friends. Just trying to help.”

“Thanks, but there’s nothing to help, mate. It’s all just another bad idea brought about by the Hellmouth and a couple of convenient situations. That’s it. Nothing will come of it. Nothing can.”

“You don’t want to let him-.”

Spike stuffed his cigarettes into a pocket and stood by the door. “Clem, let it go, mate. It’s a bloody bad idea and that’s it. I’ll not bring Xander into anything more than the friendship we already have. He’s hurting
enough, and stressed enough right now, without getting into a fling with a possessive demon.”

“Even if it’s what you want?”

Spike nodded once. “Even if.” Spike pointed to the list on the table. “Thanks for that, let me know soon as you get something. It’s urgent.”

Spike ignored the protests from Clem and let himself out, breaking into a run as soon as he reached the sidewalk. It didn’t matter if he was starting to feel something for Xander and even though Garry had intimated that it was real, Spike still had his doubts. He was certain that if Xander took the time to recognise and examine the feelings Spike knew he was having, he’d see as well that it was nothing more substantial than a mild infatuation, a result of their healing together.

As soon as this thing with the witches was over, and they were both past the heartbreak that was Buffy’s death, Spike knew things would return to normal. He only hoped that the relationship they had now would still be in place at the end of it all.

Part Twenty-Two

Spike had left Clem’s at a sprint and found himself wandering one of the older, more remote cemeteries
that Sunnydale had to offer. It was a good move; that cemetery had paid out very nicely. No matter where he turned, there had been a constant supply of both fledges and older vamps, a demon and one group of human teenagers he had gleefully put the wind up- though carefully and from a distance, it wasn’t a great idea to antagonise the humans when you didn’t have the capacity to hit back.

It had been a more than welcome way to pass the time. He fought automatically though, with little conscious effort when it came to the much weaker fledges. He’d let his mind wander, mulling over Garry and Clem’s words. He knew they were right, but he didn’t have to like it. Spike funnelled that feeling of helplessness, and his attacks were short but brutal. He’d dragged himself home just minutes before dawn, cleaned up the few cuts and scrapes he’d gotten and collapsed into bed.

Spike hadn’t thought he’d see Xander again until maybe their regular Friday night out. But here he was, Thursday afternoon, knocking on the crypt door before the sun was even down. Spike heard his familiar sounds before the knocking had even begun. He considered lying there until Xander left, but only for a split second, then he pulled his jeans on with a resigned sigh and climbed the ladder.
He pulled the door open, shielding his eyes against the afternoon sun and pretended he didn’t hear the sharp intake of breath from Xander as he took in the sight of a bed rumpled Spike, clad in only a pair of black jeans. He smiled to himself at the familiar scent wafting by as Xander walked in. It might be the worst idea in the history of bad ideas, but Spike couldn’t deny the appeal of having someone who felt that way about him.

“So, fill me in. What can Clem tell us?” Xander asked as he sat on the arm of a chair.

“Give me a minute here, yeah? Sun’s not even down yet.” Spike ran his hands through his hair and wondered if it looked as bad as it felt. Judging by the way Xander was watching him, it couldn’t be too bad.

“Oh, sorry,” Xander said, then stood again. “I can go, I shouldn’t have come so early.”

“Sit, sit.” Spike waved him back. “You want a drink?”

“You sure? I don’t want to-.”

“I’m not gonna offer you a bloody drink if I want you out. Here,” Spike said as he handed Xander a bottle of Coke then set his bag of blood to warm.
Spike took a moment to check his hands and was pleased to see the evidence of last night’s outing was gone. Top quality blood source the boy had put him onto. Spike knew he hadn’t been in such good form for a long while. A constant supply of human blood was the only thing for peak strength and optimum healing time.

“I ever thank you for putting me onto that TJ bloke?” Spike asked, holding up the blood bag.

Xander shrugged. “I don’t know, doesn’t matter any way. That working out for you? I mean, it must be, you look gr-, um, well, you look well.” Xander turned away and busied himself looking through the newest pile of movies.

Spike smiled. He could see the blush creeping up the back of Xander’s neck. “Yeah, **mate**, it’s working out just fine. So, ah, thanks, I appreciate the tip off.”

“Sure.” Xander left the movies and wandered around the crypt, avoiding looking at Spike.

Spike was sure the boy was mumbling to himself, but even when he listened harder, there was nothing much that he was able to catch. There was just the stray phrase- *donut boy*, popping up several times in his quiet ramblings along with *kidding myself* and *no chance*. Spike
had no clue what *donut boy* meant, but based on the rest, he could take a fairly educated stab at what was running through Xander’s mind right then.

He wanted to go over there, grab him by the arms and shake him; to look directly into his eyes and tell him that he was wrong. But he couldn’t. The poor bloke had dealt with too much and come so far that Spike couldn’t complicate his life any more than it already was. Spike had to get past this now, or at least make sure that he kept his head till they both came to their senses. He lit a cigarette and opened the crypt door a crack, letting the smoke drift outside.

“Oi!” Spike shouted, startling Xander out of his meandering, effectively putting a stop to the things he really didn’t want to hear or think right now. “You not losing the plot on me, are you? You know what they say about blokes who talk to themselves.”

Xander stopped in his tracks and stared at Spike. “You heard that?”

Spike considered the absolute horror on the boy’s face and decided it was another one of those times to play dumb. “Nope, not a thing. I just saw your lips moving. People will think you’re barmy doing that.”
“Oh.” The relief that passed across his face was easy to see. “No I wasn’t talking to myself, well yeah, I was, but I was just-.”

“Do what you please mate, no need to explain yourself to me is there?” Spike blew a stream of smoke and watched it trail out the door. “But why don’t you sit down before you wear a hole in my nice floor, yeah?”

Xander looked down at his feet as though he were about to apologise, then his face relaxed into a smile. “Oh, ha ha, funny vampire.”

“I try,” Spike said as he flicked his cigarette butt outside and bolted the door. Interesting that. Not too many humans would let themselves be locked into a crypt with a vampire. Spike knew he could take that either way. He could be offended that he obviously cut such a non-threatening figure that Xander was no longer scared of him in the slightest. Or he could be pleased Xander regarded him as a friend and trusted him enough to let him lock them in. Pleased gave him that sappy warm glow he was getting used to, so he went with that.

“So, Clem?” Xander asked from the recliner.

Spike dropped into the other chair with this mug of warm blood. “Right, Clem.”
“I wish you’d have let me go too.”

No you bloody well don’t, Spike thought. He could just imagine the pieces Xander would be in today if he’d been there to see Garry’s parlour tricks. “Yeah, well, walking into a room full of drunk demons maybe isn’t your brightest or safest move, eh?”

“When you put it that way, I guess not,” Xander conceded. “So did you find out anything new while you were there?”

Spike snorted, but kept those thoughts to himself. “Clem has the list and he’s going to show it to a few contacts. If those things are on the market, Clem’ll find out for us.”

Xander sat forward on the chair, clearly irritated. “But how long will that take? I hate what I’m doing with Willow. Can you call him? See what he knows?”

“Settle down, mate. Clem’ll do the best he can. He’ll find me as soon as he has something, okay?”

“So, what do we do in the meantime?”

Spike finished his blood and set the mug down. “Nothing out of the ordinary, you visit with the witch, make like seeing the list was no big deal. Pick up anything she lets slip.”
“Same old same old.” Xander shrugged.

“That’s it, mate. Just stick to your new routine.”

“Routine?” Xander’s head jerked up. “Oh, that’s what I had to tell you. Tomorrow’s Friday.”

“Right. Thanks for that. Friday, I’ll keep it in mind.”

“No, really. I can’t go out with you tomorrow night, Willow wanted to cook for me and Dawnie; she insisted it had to be Friday.”

“At least with Niblet there, it’s going to be an easy night isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess. You know, once this would have been my ideal Friday night. My best friend, Dawn, Tara, a night at home catching up.”

“And now?”

“Even though Dawnie’ll be there, it’s the last place I want to be. I have a routine for Friday nights now, and I’m pretty happy with it. I’d much rather be out at the bar, or on patrol.”

“Never mind that, we can go Saturday instead if you like. You need to keep up this pretence with the witch. It’s more important.”
Xander nodded slowly. “Yeah, I suppose it is. I guess if I start pulling out of things like that she’s gonna be suspicious.”

“Too right she is, and the last thing we want is a suspicious witch who’s already dipping a toe in the crazy pool.”

“She’s not that bad, she’s just having a hard time of it.”

“Don’t make excuses for her, mate.” Spike leapt out of his chair and threw his hands up. “Who bloody isn’t having a hard time? Look at the Bit. Look at the watcher. Look at me and you. The slayer’s death did things to all of us that we couldn’t see coming. We all had to deal with it and none of us have resorted to something so soddin’ wrong. The witch is weak, that’s all.” Spike lit a cigarette and began pacing his familiar route around the crypt, so incensed that he didn’t give a thought to opening the door.

“I know.” Xander sighed. Spike could hear the resignation. “She never spoke to any of us. I mean, I don’t know what goes on between her and Tara, but this whole time she never really sat down with me, or Giles, and talked. Sure we’ve mentioned it in passing once or twice, but not really had that talk, you know what I mean?”
Spike stopped in front of Xander and pointed with his cigarette. “Any one of you mate, might have been able to help her out. Hell, even I might have had a word with her if she’d asked.”

“Maybe I should have been there more for her.” Xander slouched down in the chair, tipped his head back and contemplated the ceiling. “I spent so much time with you, and that made it easier for me to cope, but what about her? I was her best friend and I don’t think I did enough to help her get through this. Great friend I am.”

Spike bit back a frustrated growl. Typical bloody Xander Harris. Take the blame and accept the blame for any damn thing that crossed his path be it his fault or not. “Oi! Don’t you go taking this on yourself. It’s not like you abandoned her, is it now? She had ample opportunity to say something. You have to look after yourself as well, and you’ve done right by the Niblet. You’ve nothing to be ashamed of and not a bloody thing to be feeling guilty over. Get that right out of your head, mate.”

Xander was startled out of his slouch by the no nonsense tone of Spike’s voice. “I know you’re right, I didn’t mean-.”

“You bloody well did mean it, and I won’t have it. You’ve had the same blow to deal with that she has and done a
damn sight better job of it too. She’s got no excuse. And you’ve got no business taking the responsibility for it.”

“I don’t. I won’t. You’re right.” Xander groaned and rubbed his hands over his face. “She shouldn’t have taken it this far.”

Spike felt the tension radiating from Xander and knew he needed to ease off. It wasn’t Xander’s fault that he automatically took the blame, those friends of his and no doubt his useless parents had a hand in that. And was he any better? Berating the boy for something like that. Xander came here for support and friendship, and Spike wanted to give him that. He bloody well wanted to give him a lot more, but knew better than to try.

“No, mate, she shouldn’t,” Spike said, softening his voice and relaxing his stance. “But she has and we need to do what we can. So you go off and have a nice dinner with Niblet, maybe even forget this mess and just have a good night with your friends, yeah?”

“Will you be here? After that, I mean?” Xander stood and walked slowly towards the door. “You know, just in case she let’s slip with something?”
Spike opened the door for him; the sun had almost gone down behind the trees and it was safe enough here now. “How about I wait here for you then, just in case?”

Xander’s face was lit up by a combination of the afternoon sun and a warm smile. “Yeah, okay, that’d be good.”

“Settled.” Spike nodded and tried to contain the feelings that were building. There was a sudden longing to reach out and touch that smile, to see if it really was as warm as it looked. Harder to resist was the increasing desire to have some kind of physical contact with him that would do so much more to show his support than just his words. Nothing he had on his mind could be construed as mere friendship though. “See you tomorrow night, yeah?” Spike shoved his hands deep into his pockets.

Xander’s eyes followed the movement of Spike’s hands, quickly ran across his bare chest then looked away just as fast. “Yeah. Tomorrow.”

Spike lit a cigarette and leaned against the door frame, watching Xander disappear through the trees.
Part Twenty-Three

It was a day of waiting. And days like this, time dragged. Spike knew he could sleep through some of it, but he’d never been much good at sleeping with things on his mind. Drinking, smoking, TV- all good, but not distracting enough. When the hands inched around the clock, like each minute was a day, Spike knew where his mind would end up going. He gave up fighting it.

It was surprising how fast time had gone though, when you looked back over decades, a century even. Didn’t really seem that long. Spike could remember a great portion of what he did, how he felt and where he was. Those thoughts wormed their way in often, and Spike knew that now, even though he was the same demon, in the same body, he was, for want of a better term, a different man.

He was a man with more control. This Spike, the Spike with years more experience- he was a man who had taken hold of the various leashes that led him- the demon, the chip, the remnants of the human. One hundred and twenty plus years had served him well. Spike knew he was no longer the impatient, bloodthirsty
vampire he used to be. It wasn’t just because of the chip holding him back, it was age. Mind, not body. Sure, sometimes he lost his grip on the leash and one of the leads would run away with him, but now he better knew how to take control back.

Spike lay on his bed, thinking of the days with Angelus; the days without. Remembering himself and the feelings he had, the desperation to please his Sire- the uncontrollable urge to annoy him, almost to the point of staking. The deepest passion for the brittle porcelain and unbending steel that was his Dru. He looked on these things not with a sense of loss or longing, but as though he was reading a well-crafted account of someone else’s existence.

There was longing, but it came from a different place now. It was new, possibly even unwelcome. But try as he might to ignore it, it was not leaving him. Spike knew that, for now at least, the him that belonged to Angelus and Drusilla was gone. Yes, he was still a vampire, yes he still had urges and bloodthirsty rages, but he was the master of those now. He laboured under no misapprehensions, however. That version of him could make a return any time, he was never too far away; Spike merely had to drop one of the leads. But for now, he had a tight grip. His demon still longed for and needed the
fights and the violence, and Spike knew it always would. But the whole of him longed for a place with a new family.

Whether it was solely due to the demon or not, he didn’t know, but Dawn and Xander had become family. The feelings he formerly associated with his sires were now firmly linked to those two humans. Possessive. Protective. Of both of them. He could push it away, gloss over it and make any number of excuses, but Spike knew for certain that he would not be able to ignore it any longer.

Time ticked on. Spike now sat in front of the television but took nothing in. Eventually, he felt the crawling sensations and knew the sun would be down in just minutes. Time to go out, to run, fight, kill, but he’d as good as given his word to Xander that he’d be here. If he went out and Xander came by, that would not rest easy with him. Not only had he made the promise, but he felt the need. He knew that was the demon urging him to protect what was his, but wrapped up tightly with that was the beginnings of an attraction he’d thought to discount. That was another driving force in his decision to stay put. A broken promise would hurt the boy, Spike wasn’t about to do that.
He was sure he’d spent more time waiting this week then ever before in his existence. But never had he been this anxious, this impatient. Sunset came and went; it grew dark. He could hear the sounds of daredevil, possibly suicidal, teens out in the cemetery. There were howls, yips and growling that didn’t come from any normal animal. Insects buzzed and whistled and leaves fell. Normal night.

Spike cursed and leapt up to pull on his boots and duster. Yeah, it was a normal night. And what happened on normal nights in Sunnydale? People got eaten. Spike grabbed his smokes and hip flask, locked up his crypt and headed for the gates. What kind of protection could he offer sitting on his arse in front of the telly? It was still too early for the boy to be here, but better safe than incredibly sorry.

On his way through the grounds, Spike ignored that little green bastard inside, and did his bit for the good guys. It only took a flash of his fangs and his golden eyes, and the group of not-so-brave teenagers had run for the exit, with Spike right behind them. Not before time either, as the tall, thin Ouwek demon that had been tracking them emerged from the cover of trees. Angered by Spike’s interference, the demon launched itself at him
Enthusiastic fighters, those Ouwecs. Just what Spike needed to distract himself. He knew he could easily take this one, and it was enraged enough by his interference to just keep fighting now, no matter how obvious the outcome. Spike toyed with it for a time, then dispatched the demon with one simple blow to the chest as soon as he heard Xander’s car approaching.

Xander arrived with more speed, screeching tyres and slamming of doors than Spike was used to hearing. As soon as he got out of the car, Spike could hear Xander’s heart was racing and his breathing jagged. Something had gone wrong. Spike kicked the demon carcass into bushes and met him at the gate.

The stress was immediately evident. Xander’s face was white with anger, his jaw set in a hard line. “I know she’s my best friend and I’m supposed to love her, but right now I ha-.”

“Oi, now, don’t go saying something you might regret later. What happened, mate?”

Xander had his hands on his hips, his chest heaving with the effort to calm himself, or perhaps restrain himself. He looked longingly into the dark recess of the cemetery, then made a sudden move to the trunk of his car. “Forget it. Let’s get some weapons, I need to patrol.”
Spike had seen sadness and despair, he’d seen regret, guilt and, more recently, happiness. This outright anger was new. He let Xander take a stock of weapons out of the car then held his hand out. “Here, let me carry those.”

Still focused on peering into the shadows, Xander handed the knives to Spike, then the axes. “Okay, let’s go.” He strode towards the gates at an eager pace.

“No.” Spike spoke softly but firmly.

Xander stop mid-stride and spun around to glare at him. “What?”

“I said no, mate, we’re not going out. You’re coming back to mine.”

“Spike, I’m really not in the mood for this, give me my axe.” Xander reached out, but Spike held the weapons away.

“No, Harris.”

“What the hell? It wasn’t a question. Now give me my goddamn axe.” Xander snatched at the axe handle but Spike’s reflexes were much faster, and his hand grabbed at empty air.
Spike didn’t answer him again, just took off at a fast walk back towards his crypt, knowing full well Xander would follow. He wasn’t disappointed.

“Jesus, Spike, will you stop?”

“When we get back inside.”

Spike heard Xander’s footsteps and angry breathing as he jogged to catch up. Then there was a hand on his shoulder trying to halt him, but Spike shrugged it off despite how good it felt.

“Why are you doing this? The weapons are mine; just give them back so I can go kill something.”

Spike kept walking. “I’m not letting you go out when you’re in this frame of mind. Look at you Harris, you’re gonna blow a gasket if you don’t calm down.”

“I’ll calm down when you give back my things. Will you stop, dammit,” Xander shouted as he grabbed at Spike’s sleeve and yanked on his arm. “It’s not like you could stop me taking them anyway if I wanted to.”

That was unexpected. Spike stopped and faced him. “What are you saying? You’re going to fight me for these because I can’t touch you? Is that what you want? Because I can’t fight back?”
“No, I’m sorry, no I’m not.” Xander closed his eyes and took deep steadying breaths. “We’ve patrolled plenty of times Spike, why are you doing this to me tonight? I just need to let some steam off. Please.”

“Mate, look at the state of you. It would be suicide to go out there tonight. You’re so wound up you can’t even breathe right. And, if you could hear your heart-, well, you can feel that I’d wager, so no need for me to tell you. So no. You do not get to patrol tonight. I’m not picking up pieces of you.”

“I’m fine.” Xander sighed and his body sagged as he held out his hand for a weapon. “Please.”

“You bloody well are not, and I’ll not hear another word about it. I’ll patrol with you almost any other time, but not now, not like this, it’s too risky and I’ll not risk you.”

Spike knew this boy now, knew him well enough to recognise the defeat in his posture. He hated himself for being the cause, but knew that there was no way Xander would have handled himself tonight, not with the adrenaline he was pumping out. Spike switched the weapons to one hand and the other rested on Xander’s back between his shoulders, guiding him towards the crypt. “Come on, mate. Back to mine, yeah? I’ll get you a
drink and you tell me what those thoughtless bints have done now.”

Xander let himself be led and Spike couldn’t be sure, but perhaps the boy leaned into him just a fraction. He was close enough that Spike could hear his heart slowing and feel the heat from his body.

“I’m sorry, Spike, I wouldn’t have done anything. That was a shitty thing to say.”

“Yeah, I know. Just one of those things isn’t it? We all say something stupid when we’re pissed off.”

Xander shook his head. “No excuse.”

“Forget it, mate.”

“No, really, I’m sor-.”

“Oi, I said forget it. Don’t get me going when I have a handful of weapons, you silly git.”

Xander gave a soft laugh. As they walked on in silence, Spike could feel the warmth of the boy’s skin through his shirt, the hard muscles under a soft layer of flesh and Spike was barely resisting the urge to rub his back. As the silence increased, Spike detected a rise in heartbeat again, along with the familiar scent of Xander’s reaction
to him. Taking temptation right out of the equation, Spike dropped his hand from Xander’s back and split his load of weapons between both hands.

He noticed the quick glance Xander gave his hands as well as the fact that the boy hadn’t moved any further away. They still bumped arms and brushed hands every other step. Spike snorted and sneered at himself. This was no better than a school boy sneaking a kiss behind the building, but there was no way he was going to move either. He inhaled Xander’s scent and wished that circumstances were different.

Inside the crypt, Spike dropped the weapons in a discreetly out of the way corner and made them both drinks. He’d guessed the boy would be up for a beer first and knew he’d been right when he got a grateful smile and a soft, “Thanks.”

“Any time, mate.” Spike sat in the other chair and watched Xander over the top of his glass as he sipped the whiskey. There was no need to ask how the boy was doing, Spike could see he’d calmed. Yes, he was still agitated and upset, but the slow walk back to the crypt had diffused the rage.

Xander sat in the chair, leaning forward and twisting the bottle around in his hands. His eyes were focused
somewhere in the depths of his beer and Spike just let him sit and contemplate until he was ready to talk again.

“You say that a lot now,” Xander said, his voice low and wondering. “Did you notice?”

“What? Anytime?”

“No. You never used to call me anything, except sometimes Harris. Now you call me ‘mate.’” Xander glanced up from under his eyelashes then quickly dropped his gaze back to his drink. “You say it a lot.”

Xander’s voice was so soft, not a quite whisper, just so cautious and reticent that Spike had difficulty working out the motivation for his statement. Simplest thing was just to agree. “I do.”

“Is that-, am I-, do you call Clem that as well?”

“S’what I call all my friends.”

“Oh. I know I said once before that it was too hard, us being friends, but I think I was wrong.”

Spike nodded. “Think you might have been.”

“We don’t have the best history.”

“History’s past. Best not to dig up the past.”
“My thoughts exactly.” Xander swallowed down a good portion of his beer and then watched the swirling liquid. “It’d be good if everyone else thought that too.”

“And they don’t?” Getting to the core of the matter now, best not to push him though, not when he was still looking for those answers in the bottom of his drink.

Xander finished his beer in one go and thumped the bottle down on the end table. “No they don’t.” He sat back for a moment, then leaned forward in a quick movement, his expression suddenly angry again. “Tonight wasn’t a quiet dinner with my best friends, tonight was a set up. Another one of Willow’s great plans, except she wasn’t alone in this one.”

“What else can she be up to?” Spike asked. “She’s already got that bloody spell debacle to work with, what more does she want?”

“She wants to dig up my past. My recent past, but it’s still history you know? I’m over it, don’t want go there again. But she thinks it’s a possibility.”

“What is? What’s she done?”

Spike could see and hear how worked up Xander was again. His heart was racing, he was clenching his jaw so
tight that his breath came in short bursts from his nostrils. “Anya. She had Anya over to dinner.”

Part Twenty-Four

Spike leapt out of his chair. “What the bloody hell are you talking about? The demon bint is long gone, isn’t she?” Spike was immediately torn. If Xander’s woman was back and the witch was interfering, then maybe that meant Spike was off the hook. The boy would go back to her and that would put an end to whatever the hell this thing between them was trying to be.

That was the commonsense train of thought. The demon had other ideas and made no bones about it. Spike fought against the possessive growl that was building up; against the desire to find this woman and make sure she couldn’t take or hurt what had become a big part of his life now.
Xander’s mood suddenly changed, and he stared at Spike with concern and wide-eyed interest. “Spike? Are you okay?”

The turn about in Xander’s demeanour caught Spike unawares. “What? Why?”

Xander waved a finger towards Spike’s face. “Your eyes. They’re, um, not blue anymore.”

Spike knew he’d not had as much control as he’d thought if his face had begun to slip. He closed his eyes and tried to push the enraged demon further back. “Sorry.”

Xander just shook his head and waved Spike’s apology away. “It’s okay. It doesn’t bother me.”

“I know it doesn’t.” Spike opened his eyes and felt the lessening of the rage that had been threatening to overtake him.

“So, what is it?”

“Never mind me.” Spike collected himself and sat in the chair, fighting the urge for anxious pacing. “What the hell happened there tonight?”

Xander watched him for a moment longer then the agitation took hold again, and he snatched up the empty
bottle, twisting it roughly, before banging it back down again. “Anya came back. She came back on Tuesday and I was here so she couldn’t find me. She went to see Willow, and together they came up with this great surprise.”

“Why is she back?” Spike was careful to keep his voice neutral.

“Long story short- she didn’t make the grade. D’Hoffryn was less than impressed with her work when she went back, so he kicked her out.”

“From what I remember, she was a demon to be reckoned with back in the day. What happened?”

Xander shrugged. “Spent too long as a human? Got too close? Who knows, she just said her heart wasn’t really in it and D’Hoffryn gave her a few warnings, but, three strikes and you’re out apparently.”

“Sounds like he let her off easy. So, she came back here?”

“Yeah.” Xander sat down again and ran his hands back through his hair. “Yeah, she did. Cause, god knows, there’s just not enough happening in good old Sunnydale. Better throw an ex-demon ex-girlfriend into
the mix, wouldn’t want Xander getting all comfortable with his life, would we?”

*Ex-girlfriend?* Spike felt a surge of satisfaction. “Seems to be the way of it of late.”

“As Willow and Tara and even Dawn, they all thought it was great. *Look Xan, Anya’s back, you must have loads to talk about, we’ll just leave you alone.*”

Alone? Spike held himself very still, fists clenched by his sides. “So you’ve talked with her?”

“Well, sure, just around the dinner table, you know? The others wanted to leave us alone, but I said no.”

He said no. Spike fought the demon’s urging to crow about that. “You don’t want to have it out with her, then?”

“Why would I? We did all that when she left. As far as I’m concerned there’s nothing left to say. She moved out, I moved on, end of story”

Spike relaxed slightly. “She say why she’s back here?”

“As far as I could work out, she came to Sunnydale because it’s where she’s comfortable, she knows people here. It’s easier, I guess.”
There were really only two things Spike wanted to know; both of which would put his mind, and his demon, at rest. “So, you have to get used to living with someone again.”

“What? God, no! Are you kidding?”

“Right, so you’re not-.”

“So not.”

“Then you and her aren’t-.”

“Okay. There is no me and her. None. Never again. That’s over with, moved on, past history I don’t want to dig up, remember? Tossed away the shovel.”

With both questions now answered, Spike relaxed even more. He felt the pressure ease as the demon retreated, contented with the boy’s responses. “So she didn’t come back just for you then?”

“To be honest with you, I don’t know exactly why she came back, but there was no mention tonight of anything like that. And I am so not open to it. Not now, anyway.”

“What do you mean not now?”

Xander fidgeted and looked supremely uncomfortably. “Oh. I, um, I just mean with everything that’s gone on the
last few months, I don’t want to have to deal with something like that as well. It’s been a rough time.”

“That is has.” Spike never imagined he would be as relieved as all this. Xander wasn’t interested in a reunion with the ex. He wasn’t moving back in with her and she hadn’t approached him about either possibility. Spike sighed. That left him in the same position as before though, and he would have to ride out this thing that was happening between them. Still, it meant that he wouldn’t have to deal with their reconciliation, he wouldn’t have the internal battle with his over-possessive demon. A thought struck Spike. “Last I heard those silly bints didn’t get on the best. Why’d the demon go to Red?”

“No one else around. When she couldn’t find me she tried Giles but the shop was closed and he wasn’t home, so that left the house. I suppose she just wanted to touch base with someone familiar.”

Spike watched Xander still fiddling with his empty bottle and got up to take it from him. “Red say anything to her about her plans for the slayer?” He opened a coke for Xander, and nodded at the smile of thanks. Boy was settling down a bit too. That was good.
“Nothing that I know of. She never mentioned it at dinner, anyway. Well, Dawn was there, so she couldn’t even if she wanted to.”

“You seemed pretty upset about it all,” Spike ventured, sure Xander had calmed enough that he would be able to talk about it without losing his grip again.

“Yeah.” There was no anger in that, just tired resignation. “But not because Anya was there, just that Willow thought this would be a great surprise. It’s too soon for her to do things like that, you know?”

“How do you mean?”

“How long has it been since I told Willow I’d help her? A week? Nearly two? I’m still pissed at the way she hounded me about that spell, and here she is dropping something like that in my lap, like nothing’s ever been wrong between us.”

“Don’t forget, mate, she thinks you’re on board with her now. So, I suppose as far as she knows, there is nothing wrong between you.”

“Which leads me to the next thing. Even if everything was normal with me and her, then how could she think springing Anya on me is a good idea? Would I turn up at
her door with Oz without giving her a heads up? Geez, no.”

Spike hated to ask the next question. “You think she’s trying to get you two back together again?”

“I have no idea what she’s thinking; not a damn clue. She may honestly have just not even thought about it.” Xander sat and sipped at his drink. “You know, now that I think about it, I’d say that’s probably it. She just didn’t think.”

“Yeah, well, true to form at the moment, isn’t it?” Spike got up and stood by the door as he lit a cigarette.

“You don’t have to do that, I don’t mind the smoke so much,” Xander said, coming to lean against the wall near the door.

“Might not have to, but I want to.” Spike blew a steady stream of smoke out the door and watched the breeze take it.

Xander just smiled an odd crooked little smile, folded his arms and watched the smoke swirling away. They were both silent for a long while, and Spike felt the boy’s eyes on him- on his hand, on his mouth- as he followed the motion of the cigarette. There was no discomfort in being under the microscope, far from it. Spike would
never have thought being the object of Xander Harris’s fancy would affect him like this.

The next time Spike’s hand dropped down to flick the ash away, Xander didn’t track the movement. When he glanced up, Xander’s eyes were fixed on Spike’s mouth, his fingers brushing slowly back and forth over his own slightly parted lips.

Spike’s fingers itched to touch there as well. Instead he folded his arms, listening to the quickening thud of Xander’s heart. Spike cleared his throat, expecting the sound to startle the boy out of his- daydream?- fantasy? Neither of those words helped settle the desires Spike was feeling. Nor did the way Xander continued to stare at him.

This wasn’t what he’d intended. He’d just needed company, saw that Xander needed it too. But somehow, in the intervening months, they’d left enemies and then indifference behind, passed through something like tolerance, then friends and arrived here. But where was that?

Instead of snapping to attention, Xander slowly met Spike’s eyes, the faintest of frowns appearing, disappearing, reappearing on his brow. His heart sped up so fast that Spike imagined he could even hear the hum
of the racing blood pulsing through Xander’s body as the inevitable blush spread up from his neck. Xander opened his mouth several times as though he were about to speak. Each time he seemed to think better of it and closed his mouth again. He tentatively took a step away from the wall and towards Spike.

Spike knew he should diffuse the situation. He knew there was no possibility for anything here, it was just too bad an idea, for both of them. He should just turn and go back inside, switch on a football game or some such. Maybe send the boy home.

What he shouldn’t do was stand here in the doorway, basking in the obvious attention, soaking up the sounds and scents of the boy’s attraction, feeling that ache in his gut to just reach out and pull him in and keep him safe and protected from the twists and turns the Hellmouth was wont to put in the his way. He should very definitely be doing none of that.

So why couldn’t he move? Why could he resist the urge, yet not actively put a stop to it, whatever it was? What was he waiting for? Would he, a century old vampire, wait for the human boy to decide this? It wasn’t as though he couldn’t tell what Xander was thinking, anybody watching this would know. Was Xander aware
how transparent he was? Spike’s fists, tightly clenched under his arms, trembled with the effort of restraint. He was sure Xander could see it.

A dozen different scenarios ran through his head in mere seconds. All involved Spike letting Xander follow through with this course of action. All ended badly, with one or both of them snapping out of it hurt, either now or in the future, regretting the end of what had been a promising friendship, regretting that they’d let themselves succumb to an insubstantial side effect of mourning together.

Something of this must have shown on Spike’s face—some awareness, indecision, reluctance; because Xander stepped back then, the frown smoothed out, and he gave a heavy sigh and turned to look outside into the dark. It had passed. Decision made, and while Spike knew it was for the best, he couldn’t help the disappointment.

Spike lit another cigarette and watched Xander watching nothing. It wasn’t awkward silence, it wasn’t uncomfortable, but it begged to be filled. Perhaps there were things that should be acknowledged, things that if they were to speak openly about, would maybe lose their appeal, once they were reduced to simple words. “Harris, we-.”
“You know,” Xander interrupted. With a shake of his head he pushed past Spike to stand just outside. Spike pressed himself back against the wall, but still the boy was close enough to brush against him as he passed, close enough that Spike was hit full force with Xander’s scent. He deliberately did not draw breath until the air had stopped swirling. “I never thought I’d say this, but it’s so peaceful here. I mean, it’s peaceful when I’m at home too, but in a different way. At home there’s just quiet and it’s just this constant reminder when I’m there, that I’m by myself.” Xander spoke to the night. He stood just outside the door, in front of Spike, and no longer looked at him. “Anya left, Buffy’s gone and Willow’s just not my Willow right now. There’s too much time to think. Here, it’s quiet but I’m not on my own. I never thought I’d feel this comfortable here.”

Spike flicked his cigarette away into the darkness, a shower of sparks fell to the ground as the butt bounced off a gravestone. So they were going to ignore this? No, that wouldn’t help. Xander had to know how destructive it could be, he had to. He was the same Xander Harris who’d been Buffy’s champion for so many years, who’d done his damnedest to protect her from the likes of Spike and his grandsire. He knew, he’d understand. They needed to air this. “Harris-.”
“There’s something about being here that just helps me focus. I don’t feel the extremes that I do on my own. I’m unhappy with Willow for what she did to me tonight, but I’m not angry anymore. I know as soon as I go home, that’ll change again, so I really don’t want to go. But I can’t stay, can I? I shouldn’t.” Xander stuffed his hands into his back pockets and turned to face Spike.

“You shouldn’t,” Spike said gently. “Not tonight.” Damn these feelings of protectiveness. Now he couldn’t even face the boy and lay it on the line.

“I better go then.” Xander said, and backed away with a small wave.

The boy was just going to walk off into the dark on his own. Spike stepped out of the doorway. “Harris wait, you can’t-.”

Xander held up his hands. “I’ll be fine. I have stakes and I’ll be quick, my car’s right at the gate.” He turned and ran down the path that led back out.

Spike watched him leave, listened to his feet thumping on the path and knew that alone, his chances of making it to the gate untouched were slim to none. Spike swore and took off at a run. Following closely, but making no sound, he kept Xander in his sight all the way to the car.
There, he stayed deep in the shadows of the trees and watched while the boy took out his keys and opened the car.

Xander paused with the door open and looked back over his shoulder. Spike could see his gaze sweep across the row of trees and bushes behind the gates, but it was too dark for him to focus on any one spot.

The words came low and soft, but Spike easily heard them as they were directed into the cemetery. “I’ll be at the bar tomorrow night.”

**Part Twenty-Five**

Normally, during the day, Spike would get out around the town via the sewers and tunnels; just lately though he’d been staying put. Especially on the weekends, when there was nothing to stop Xander from dropping by at any time. Not that Spike expected it, or hoped for it. No, he wouldn’t say hoping, that would just sound too bloody desperate.

No, he was just being cautious. He’d set this grand plan in motion, sent the lamb off to the potential slaughter, the least he could do would be to stay put, just in case he was needed. Yeah, that wasn’t too desperate, that was just being a good mate.
So, being a good mate, Spike stayed in and spent the better part of the afternoon running through all possible outcomes of meeting Xander at the bar. For both their sakes. For several hours he pretended like he really had an option. Like he didn’t already know he would be there with bloody bells on.

All his interactions with the boy of late were based around his own nonsensical protectiveness, the attachment the demon felt and the attraction he felt. Those things all led him to making decisions that would protect Xander from further hurt. So if he were to refuse to meet him again, then wouldn’t that just be opening the poor bastard up for more heartache? Spike told himself that was the only reason he was going. It had nothing to do with giving in to any other kind of feelings.

Despite the potential for disaster, Spike would go. But he’d be on the lookout for surprise moments like that which had taken hold last night. He wouldn’t let that happen again. He was going to do his damnedest to keep this friendship on an even keel until they both got over this thing.

Before that though, Spike needed to get out. ‘Vampire’ out, not ‘human’ out. He was too twitchy, too on edge, too out of whack. Spike wasn’t having any demon-driven
issues, and that perhaps was the most telling thing for him. All this turmoil was coming solely from him- or him and Xander more accurately. Time to simplify things.

Spike filled his coat pockets with the standard smokes, lighter and flask and was out the door as the first stars appeared. There was still an hour or so before he knew Xander would be at the bar, and Spike planned to use the time wisely- as wisely as a restless, aggravated vampire could be expected to.

Nothing settled his anger and anxiety like a nice long brawl, and nothing attracted potential fight partners more than the chemical-laden air surrounding rutting teens. That in mind, Spike headed for the road on the far side of the cemetery, where he knew there was a lover’s lane of sorts.

It was reasonably early for a Saturday night, but already there were several couples out, who had no idea how close they were to death. Or maybe they did, and who was Spike to question that particular bent? He took up a position in an out of the way spot and sipped from his flask as he waited for the fun to start.

Spike laughed to himself. Had he really changed that much? He still loved a good fight- ached for it, in fact. If not for the chip, he would be the one pulling those kids
from the car and loving every second of it. But Spike was nothing if not adaptable, and he took his pleasure where he could. Demons and vampires would satisfy the urges for now and the fight would help him unwind.

Spike’s body was tense as he waited. He was more than ready to let fly when the first group of vampires showed up. They would bear the brunt of the stress that had built in him over the week. With a smile of anticipation for what he knew was coming, Spike launched himself from the cover of the shadows and ran howling towards his first kill.

No more than an hour later, Spike brushed the dust from the last of the vampires off his shoulders and snarled at the humans stupid enough to be still sitting in their cars. As their spinning tyres kicked up fountains of dirt and gravel, Spike tidied himself up and heaved a great sigh of relief as he realised just how much he’d needed that, how much it had done to calm him down again.

As he walked to the bar, completely relaxed, Spike lit a cigarette and pondered the question of why it was just not a good fight or a good fuck unless there was a smoke at the end.

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Spike rounded the corner and saw the light streaming from the bar and glinting off the bumper of a very familiar car. Xander was waiting there already. Spike had only a moment’s hesitation, then pushed his way inside. This decision had been made long ago.

The air was thick with the smell of smoke, beer and greasy food, but Spike was positive he could still scent Xander above all that. He fancied too, that he might even hear that unpredictable heartbeat over the ambient noise.

Spike stood just inside the door, knowing that it would only be seconds before Xander spotted him- one of the benefits of the seat he invariably chose. And there it was. Xander’s head lifted up, his eyes smiling and shining long before his mouth did. Spike just stared. This was such an incredibly bad idea. No matter how that smile made him feel, no matter how much he’d come to enjoy the way Xander’s face lit up for him. Maybe he should just make up a bloody appointment and leave.

Xander’s smile faltered as Spike stood, torn between the door and the table. It was that split second of hurt that he saw on the boy’s face that urged Spike forward. There were many terrible and, yes, evil things he had done and
could still well do, but being the cause of that face on this person, was no longer something he cared for.

Spike gave him a brief smile and a nod and ordered their drinks, noting with relief that Xander’s smile had reappeared, albeit slightly more guarded.

There was little doubt now that they were both aware of what was going on. Xander had made his intentions more than clear last night. Also made clear was the fact that he wasn’t ready to talk about it just now; nor was he ready to act on it. Maybe that was a good thing. If he wasn’t ready to talk then maybe he wasn’t too invested yet. Maybe Xander would recognise it as an idle fancy and let it go. Maybe he knew, as well as Spike did that it was just another consequence of Buffy’s death.

That was a few too many maybes for Spike’s liking.

Spike collected the drinks and made his way to their table. Xander watched him every step of the way.

“You’ve been fighting,” Xander said as he took the drink Spike held out to him. He wondered if it was an accident that Xander’s fingers brushed over his, then decided either way he didn’t mind.
Spike rubbed a hand over his face feeling for telltale cuts or scrapes, or stray drops of blood.

“Don’t worry, there’s nothing there, you just look really relaxed.” Xander’s eyes suddenly widened and he blushed furiously. “Ah. Unless you’ve been, um, doing something else. Which is totally okay and you don’t have to answer me. I’m mind-my-own-business-guy over here. But if you-.Oh.” A look of relief came over Xander’s face as he watched Spike’s hands toying with glass. “Your knuckles are cut. You have been fighting. And here’s me shutting the hell up before I make a bigger idiot of myself.”

Spike couldn’t help but smirk. How long had it been since the boy had lost control of his mouth like that? Far too long. He’d been so guarded and careful the last few months, this was just more evidence of the healing. “Yeah, I stopped off on the way to work out a few kinks.”

“Vamps?”

Spike went on to explain about the dirt road and car loads of ‘hormonally charged mindless bloody gits’ who needed rescuing on a regular basis. Xander listened with interest till Spike finished then there was just silence. This time it was an uncomfortable stretch.
A new awareness hung between them and Spike didn’t know quite how to go about addressing it. He began to wish he could be his usual tactless, almost callous self and just outright confront Xander. But no, the soddin’ demon wasn’t going to have a bar of that. Spike knew he couldn’t just barrel in and lay it all on the line; it was those damn protective urges. Protect the boy from anything, even from himself.

In the end, Spike was saved from the decision as Xander finished his drink and carefully examined the empty bottom. “I didn’t think you’d come.”

“Oh, yeah, you did. But, I thought you’d-.” Xander shook his head. “Nevermind.”

Spike sighed. “You thought that if I’d followed you through the cemetery last night, I might have heard you say you’d be here, yeah?”

The surprise on Xander’ face was almost comical.

“Be serious, Harris. You think I’d let you go running off like that, in the dark by yourself? Niblet would stake me ten ways from Sunday if I let anything happen to you.”
“Right.” Xander raised his eyebrows. “It’s still all about Dawn is it?”

Spike shrugged. “Some of it, yeah.”

Xander nodded, crossed his legs and leaned back in his seat, resting his empty glass on his knee. He considered Spike for a short time. “Not all of it?”

Here we go. Spike picked up his drink and swallowed the greater part of it in one gulp. “No, mate, not all of it.”

“So then, how much is not about Dawn?”

The boy had downed his beer with unusual haste and Spike had to wonder if it had been pure nerves or Dutch courage. “You really want to do this?”

“I really think I do. Because it’s not just me is it? I thought for a long time that it was.”

Spike slowly shook his head. “No, Harris, it’s not just you. Although it might be easier all round if it was.”

Xander’s smile gradually crumpled into a frown. “Why?”

Tread carefully. “You have a lot on your plate. Anything more than this -. Spike waved his hand between them and at the bar in general. “-would be a bloody bad idea.”
“You’ve thought about it already.” Spike wondered if Xander had meant that to sound as accusing as it was.

“Soon as I worked it out. Came to the same conclusion every time.”

“That this is a bad idea?”

“That this is not something that should have happened. We ended up getting ourselves stuck together at a time when we were both needing a bit of company to help us out.”

“So what? What do the circumstances matter?”

“The circumstances mean that this is more than likely just a passing fancy. Look at where we were a few months ago. I would gladly have bitten you and you would have been more than happy to stake me.”

“Well sure, but that changed didn’t it? Unless, you still want to bite me?”

Spike was thankful he couldn’t blush. Biting a willing Xander would be a treat high on his list of wants were he ever to get that close without his chip. He pushed the image away quickly. Sometimes there were worse things than blushing. “No, and that’s not the point.”
“Well, what is? There’s something going on here isn’t there? You don’t want to find out what it is? If it could go anywhere?”

“I think it would do more harm than good to follow it through. And looking at where it came from, I just don’t think it has the potential to go anywhere good. You’re forgetting the biggest issue here.”

“You’re gonna say something about inter-species relations right? Didn’t seem so much of a problem for Buffy and-.”

“And look how that ended.”

“Why, are you cursed too?”

“Harris, we’re friends. You can label it what you like and deny it, ignore it, sweep it under the rug, but we’re friends. Have been for a while. Now, I don’t have a great lot of friends, you may have noticed. So the ones I do get, I’d like to keep a hold of. We take this thing anywhere, it ends badly and I lose a friend I would bloody well like to keep.”

“You seriously think it would go that badly?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t want to gamble this one.”
Xander snorted. “Yeah, cause Xander Harris? Not worth the risk. Never has been. Fine, Spike. I get it.” Xander made to stand up, but Spike grabbed his arm and pulled him back down.

Spike wanted nothing more than to explain about the demon, and its overprotective, possessive urges. About how if they got involved it would only increase the demon’s attachment to him. Could a human take that? Could Spike still hold back a demon that wanted to claim this boy for its own? Best if that never had to come out.

“Bloody hell, Harris. Will you stop being such a-.” Spike caught himself and sighed. He was going about this badly. When Xander looked as though he would stay put Spike tried again, despite the boy’s thunderous expression. “Look. We’re mates. We’re good mates. We helped each other out with a rough patch and I think that’s what this is all about. I think it was just a reaction and I don’t think it will stand up to closer examination. You get me? If we try, I could well lose a good mate. It’s not that you aren’t worth the effort, it’s because I’d rather have you for a friend than not at all.”

Xander listened carefully, nodding all the while. Spike thought he appeared considerably calmer. “And you’re so certain this would all end in tears?”
“More than a good chance.”

“And you’re not even willing to give it a shot?”

“No.” Spike shook his head firmly.

“Last word?”

“Yeah.”

Xander stood and Spike couldn’t remember ever seeing such a look of anger directed at him. “And how does that make you any different to anyone else in my life? Making decisions for me like I count for nothing; giving me no say. Fuck you, Spike.”

“Harris-.” Spike tried to grab him again, but Xander pulled his arm away.

“Leave me alone. I’m going home.” Xander turned to leave and Spike started after him.

Spike called out to him as Xander pushed his way out onto the sidewalk. “Xander-.”

“No.” He spun around and faced Spike, pointing a finger in his chest. “You had your say, I don’t want to hear any more. You thought about it, you made a decision based on what you think. I don’t care how old you are or how much you’ve seen or done. And I know I’m not much
more than a kid to you, but *I* should still get a say. Friends don’t work that way, Spike.”

Xander threw himself into the car and slammed the door behind him. Spike watched him pull out onto the road and disappear around the first corner. How the fuck had that gone so wrong so fast?

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**Part Twenty-Six**

“I. Bloody. Fixed. It.” Spike’s fist pounded into the vampire’s gut with each word. “Problem.” Roundhouse kick to the head. “Solved.” Stake to the heart.

Spike wiped the blood from his lips and looked around the darkened park. “Alright, who’s next? Step up, then.” There was no sound other than the insects and rustling foliage. “Come on, I know you’re in there. I can smell you.”

Silence again. He lit a cigarette, picked up his bottle of Jack from the ground and waited. He’d worked his way through the nest of vamps and knew there was just one
left- the one who fancied himself their leader. The rest had been easy, and Spike knew this one would be too. Too easy. He’d need to move on again.

He’d been at this for two days and nights. Parks, cemeteries, sewers- hell, even shopping malls. No more pacing, no more waiting; he went out and hunted. His demon was giving him hell, and Spike only knew one way to shut it up. Keep it busy with blood. Keep it blurred with whiskey.

It worked for a time, but as soon as the opponents were dust, the demon set in on him again. As soon as the alcohol vanished from his system, he remembered. Xander got hurt. Spike chose the words badly, and Xander got hurt. The one thing he’d been trying to avoid. Now the irritated and protective demon was urging him to fix it, to go see Xander and right the wrongs. The only way Spike could resist was to keep his mind and his hands busy and his demon distracted.

Spike drew long and hard on his cigarette, watching the glowing tip crawling towards his fingers. “I’ve got all night,” he called, then his voice dropped as he spoke harshly to himself. “Not like I got any one waiting for me tonight.”
Several times he’d nearly given in to the pressure. It was a short run to the boy’s apartment, or the Magic Box. A few words of apology and it would all be sorted. They’d be back to where they were. And therein lay the problem. Right back to where they were. The awkward place.

At least this way, they were apart. Whatever was taking hold of them would dissipate. Out of sight, out of mind, was Spike’s theory. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, the niggling green bastard inside contradicted him with.

“My fucking heart has nothing to do with this!” Spike tipped his head back and shouted. “It’s my bloody head, it’s all in my bloody head. No, it’s the soddin’ chip, is what it is. If I didn’t have the chip-.” Spike ground his knuckles against his forehead. “But, problem solved. Yeah, problem solved. He’s gone. He’ll hurt for a bit and then he’ll come back and say thanks, Spike. Thanks for making me see the light. You were right Spike, humans and vampires- baddest of bad ideas, we didn’t have a thing, there was no bloody thing.”

There was a crunching of gravel and a low laugh came with the vampire who wandered out from the cover of trees. “You’ve got issues, man.” The vampire tapped his
own forehead. “You’re not right in the head. You need help.”

Spike let out a howl of laughter. “Preaching to the choir, mate. Not been right in the head for a good long while now.”

“I’d be happy to put you out of your misery.”

“Who the hell said I was miserable, eh?” Spike snorted. “I’m quite happy, relatively speaking. Got a nice lot of fresh blood waiting for me at home. Got a town full of idiots, such as your good self, just begging to be beaten then dusted. What more could a vamp want, I ask you? Nothing, except another bottle of this.” Spike waved his whiskey.

“Insane.”

“So all the books say.” Spike flicked his cigarette towards the vampire.

“Yeah, sure they write books about you, man. If you were anybody, you wouldn’t be out here staking your own kind and stinking of humans, and not even human blood. You reek of them.”

Spike lifted the bottle to his lips and tipped the last third down his throat. “Look, mate, I could talk all night, but
you’re just boring the living- or unliving- well, boring the shit out of me. So, what say we skip the small talk, and get straight to the killing? Sound like a plan?”

“Sanest thing you’ve said so far,” the vampire said, nodding. “You killed my guys.”


“Evil?” the vampire scoffed. “Yeah look at you. You’re so far from evil you couldn’t even see it with a telescope, man. Fighting vampires because you can’t touch humans. Pining for a human so bad you’re drinking yourself into a stumbling mess. Have some pride, man.”

“This is not about a human,” Spike said, waving the bottle at him. “This is a leash for the fucking demon. You know a better way, I’d like to hear it.”

“Jesus, you’re talking shit. You’re not some head-spinning, possessed kid here, man, you are the demon. You gonna leash yourself? Over a human? What the hell, man? You’re not evil; you’re whipped.”

“Yeah, any road, I’m beyond bored at this point, so-.” Spike dropped the bottle and lunged for the vampire.
Just like the others in the nest, this one was an easy kill. Leader in name only, he obviously had no superior strength that won him the title. Spike toyed with him for a while, and as alcohol-soaked as he was, he still managed to stake the other vampire before it got in a serious hit.

Spike watched the dust settle, then kicked at the traces left in the grass. “What the fuck do you know, anyway, Freud? I’m not pining for a human. I did the right thing. I fixed it. Problem fucking solved.”

Spike picked up his bottle again and hurled it the ground, shattering it to pieces amidst the remains of the other vampire. “Problem solved.”

Spike wandered aimlessly through the park, looking for more violence to keep his mind busy, and, as he gradually sobered, fighting the almost overwhelming urge to find Xander and unsolve this problem.

It was easy to pretend that he needed to walk home via the Magic Box. Even easier when an accidental look through the front windows showed him only Giles and Anya at the table. Same as when he’d passed by the day before. Could he make the trip across town and still pretend that the boy’s apartment was on his way home?
Tuesday afternoon, Spike woke amid a pile of empty bottles, to a pounding at his door that he knew without a doubt wasn’t Xander. Almost immediately, he felt the need to find the boy. He sighed as he hauled himself to his feet. There was nowhere near enough Jack in the world to dull this one.

“Spike! Hey, Spike? You in there buddy?”

Spike groaned. How the hell did one man-demon-manage to sound so soddin’ cheerful all the bloody time. He unlocked the door and pulled it open a crack, stepping back from the light as Clem entered.

“Hey, there you are! Boy, you look like shit, Spike. And that’s saying something for a dead guy, huh?”

“Sun’s still up, Clem.” Spike croaked out and dropped heavily into an armchair.

“Yeah, sorry about that.” Clem shut the door and gave the crypt the once over. “Like what you’ve done with the place since I was here last. The, ah, bottles, the blood bags, the ciggy butts, the ah, pizza boxes? You’ve been ordering pizza? Geez, buddy, what’s going on here?”
Spike looked around at the mess and realised Clem was right. He shrugged. “Been busy.” No need to explain to Clem that the pizza boxes were Xander’s, and he liked the images the smell of them brought to mind.

“Oh, come on now. It’s not like you to let things go this far. Oh, wait, the last time you did this kind of thing was when your Drusilla left you, right? You told me you trashed your De Soto and yourself that time.” Clem laughed. “So what happened, she come back and dump you again?”

At Spike’s dark look, Clem sat down in the other chair and frowned. “Sorry, buddy. Bad joke. You want to tell me what’s happened?”

Spike pushed out of his chair and warmed a bag of blood while he considered airing things with Clem. Too hard basket. “Nothing happened. Everything’s fine. What brings you here?”

“Oh, you’re doing that thing again aren’t you?” Clem nodded wisely.

Spike gritted his teeth. “What thing, Clem?”

“That thing where you deny everything cause you’re far too manly to talk to a buddy about it, but if I ask you enough times you’ll cave.” He gave a nervous laugh.
“Either that or bite me. But I gotta warn you here, guy, these sexy wrinkles on my neck are a lot tougher than they look.”

“Clem-.”

“Now, far be it from me to interfere, especially in vampire business, but I figure, hey, I’m already doing you one favour with that list, I can do you one more and lend an ear to your woes.”

“Clem-.”

“Cause what are friends for if not to share a problem?” Spike could almost see the light bulb above Clem’s head. “Oh, wait, is this about that human? The one that Garry was talking about? Did you do something stupid, Spike?”

“What?” Spike shook his head, staring at Clem incredulously. “Why is it everyone always assumes it was me?”

“So you didn’t do anything to the human then? That’s not why you’ve gone all casa del hobo?”

“Bloody hell, Clem.” Spike tipped up the warm blood bag and bit into it, draining every last drop. “You just don’t quit do you?”
“Rarely. So what did you do?”

Spike suppressed a growl, knowing Clem had much more patience than he did. “Fine. Fine. You want to know what happened? I fixed it. I ended it. There. Happy now?”

“Didn’t know there was something to end.”

He let out the growl that had been building and felt like doing it a second time when Clem didn’t appear the slightest bit intimidated. “Nipped it in the bud then, if you’re gonna be pedantic about it.” Spike prowled back and forth between Clem and the TV.

“And let me guess, you went at it like the proverbial bull in the china shop, didn’t you? And it’s blown up in your face, and so rather than go sort it out, you’re wallowing. *Brooding*.”

“Oi! I do not brood. Or wallow. It might not have gone so well, but I got the results I need. The boy’s gone. He’ll get over this thing, I’ll get over this thing and we can go back to being mates. He won’t get hurt.”

“So, you haven’t hurt him already?”

Spike stopped and stared at Clem. He ran his hands through his hair and groaned. “Yeah I have, but it was for his own good. Told him it wasn’t real, just something that
wouldn’t last, and it would be best if we ignored it so nobody got hurt.”

“And what did he want to do about it?”

Spike’s forehead creased. “Sorry?”

“When you asked him what he wanted. What did he say?”

“I didn’t,” Spike mumbled, turning away.

“Didn’t what? Didn’t hear him? Didn’t ask him?” Spike flinched at that, and the bloody demon pushed even harder for him to find Xander. “Aww, Spike. Don’t tell me you didn’t even ask? You didn’t give him a choice in this? Are you insane?”

“Seems to be the general consensus this week, yeah,” he answered bitterly.

“How do you get to be your age and still act like such an ass?”

Spike rounded on him, but there was no real malice. “Wanna find out exactly how thick that skin of yours is, mate?”
“Spike, you’re not gonna bite me,” Clem said, but tucked his chin further into his neck anyway. “Why did you do that?”

“Because that boy is hurt enough right now. I’m not adding to that. I won’t.”

“But you did.”

“That’s different. He’ll get over this, he’ll be back.”

“No, Spike, he won’t. Why would he? You’re meant to be a friend, yet you treated him like a kid. Why would he come back for more of that?”

“Dammit, Clem, I did it for his own good, to protect him.”

“You didn’t ask if he wanted to be protected though, did you, buddy? He’s an adult too, you don’t think you could have given him a say? He’s not gonna come back.”

Damn Clem. Spike knew he’d stuffed up so very badly and hated that feeling. Hated even more that he had to be told, even by a good friend like Clem. “You know you’re bloody nosey.”

“Yeah, I am,” Clem conceded with a good natured smile. “I’m right though aren’t I?”
“Shut it, Clem.” Spike lit a cigarette and threw himself into an armchair.

“Yeah, I’m right, you know it.” At Spike’s low growl, Clem mimed zipping his lips.

“Something you came over for? Apart from getting into my business?”

“Oh right. Yeah.” Clem dug around in his pockets and finally pulled out a familiar piece of paper. “Got your list right here.”

Spike held his hand out for it. As he unfolded the paper, he could see there was a significant portion of the list crossed out with red marker. “What’s all this?”

“Those, my friend, are B.S,” Clem said with a grin.

“What do you mean?”

“I ran the list by a few guys, mainly demon mages, retailers, you know. Anyway, they all said the same thing. Those things that’re blocked out are just made up. No such thing. Figment of someone’s imagination. Bullshit.”

“How certain?”

“Many hundred percent.”
Spike looked over the list. The only things not crossed out were the basic herbs, crystals and other ingredients that could be obtained anywhere, with little difficulty. The witch had thrown them a red herring. Xander needed to know this.

Fuck it. Spike knew he was going to have to go, hat in hand, to find Xander and warn him.

Part Twenty-Seven

Spike stood on the sidewalk, partially concealed by a stand of trees. It had been dark for almost an hour, and from his vantage point, he could see the lights of Xander’s apartment around the edges of the curtains. He poked the toe of his boot through the scattering of cigarette butts that littered the ground near his feet. Spike glanced up at the windows again. It would do no good delaying any longer. This had to be done, he had to talk to Xander. Spike had no idea how he would be
received, although he could hazard a guess and likely not be too far out.

Spike dropped another cigarette and ground it out under his boot. Right. Time to bite the bullet and go see the boy. He’d considered just writing a note and stuffing it under his door, but no saying then that the witch wouldn’t find it. A phone call was out of the question; he had the sneaking suspicion he would be hung up on anyway. He fingered the list in his coat pocket. Only one way to do this.

One of the lights in Xander’s apartment went out as Spike jogged across the grass and let himself into the building. He took the stairs two at a time and was about to knock on the boy’s door when it opened.

There was a brief moment of happiness on Xander’s face, then it reflected the same hurt and anger that Spike had seen at the bar. Xander closed his eyes and took a long breath before he spoke. “Why are you here?”

“Got some things I need to talk to you about.”

Xander’s unwavering gaze fixed on him. “Not now.”

Should that have hurt as much as it did? “I’ve been a prize arse, but we both know that’s nothing new.”
“Actually, I kinda thought you were past that.”

“Yeah, I thought I was too,” Spike said, sighing. “Look, it’s important. Can I come in?”

“No, you can’t.” Xander resolutely stepped forward and slammed the door behind him. Not that the closed door was necessary to keep Spike out; he’d never been given an invitation to this place. “I was just on my way out to the Magic Box.”

Spike shook his head. “But it’s Tuesday.”

“So?” Xander asked and turned away from Spike, heading for the stairs.

Maybe it would be best to ignore the brusque tone and minimalist answers he was getting, and just keep the boy talking. “You don’t go to the store on Tuesdays,” Spike said as he fell in behind him.

“Giles called a meeting. I was, ah, I was supposed to come and get you.”

“Supposed to?” Spike caught the embarrassment in Xander’s words. “You weren’t going to, though?”

“Maybe.” Xander stopped and glanced back over his shoulder. “I hadn’t decided yet.”
Spike thought it best to let that one go. Had he been in the boy’s shoes, he wasn’t sure what he would have done either. “What does the watcher want?”

He’d reached his car and was opening the door. “I don’t know.”

When Xander was in the car, engine running, Spike had no idea what he should do. Get in? Walk? Go home? He glanced though the windshield, and one look at Xander’s still angry face decided for him.

Spike turned away in the direction of the Magic Box. He’d walk then. Obviously making amends was going to be even more difficult than he’d imagined. Spike had only gone a couple of steps when he heard the window open on Xander’s car.

“Get in.”

“Yeah?” Spike raised his eyebrows in question.

Xander didn’t speak again, just waited, engine idling.

He climbed in and turned to speak, but Xander’s hand snapped out to turn up the volume on the radio. From the apartment to the shop, even though Spike caught the familiar scent of interest from the boy, Xander’s eyes
never left the road, and his white-knuckled hands never left the wheel. They were back to this silent car trips.

They pulled up a few doors down from the Magic Box, and Spike gripped the door handle, thinking that he would have to put this all off for another day if he was just going to get the silent treatment.

“What did you want to talk to me about?” Xander’s voice was low, but had none of the harsh tones he’d used earlier. Now he just sounded curious.

Right then, tread lightly. “Couple of things. I think I have some things to set to rights from the other night.”

“Yeah?” Xander cast a sideways glance, the first time he’d looked at Spike since they’d left the apartment block. “You said a couple, what else?”

“Clem stopped by earlier.”

“The list?” Xander turned in his seat and faced Spike.

“Yeah.”

Xander sighed and sat back again. After a while he nodded. “Alright. Later.”

“Later?”
“There’s no time to get into all this now. Giles is waiting, the girls are waiting. We can talk about it after.”

After Xander’s initial response, that was more than Spike had been expecting. “Sounds like a plan. You don’t know what the watch-.”

“I need to be inside.” Xander said, as he all but threw himself from the car and ran into the store.

Spike had to wonder just how badly he’d stuffed things up if the boy would rather be in there with the witches, than in the car with him. Still, he had the chance to fix things later. He had to fix things. The demon wouldn’t tolerate much more idiocy from him, and Spike was beginning to wonder if he needed to fight against that inner voice quite as often as he did.

Inside, the usual group was seated around the table. A quick glance around the room got Spike twin frowns from the witches and a resigned roll of the eyes from the watcher. Dawn flew at him with a delighted squeal and he squeezed her back while watching Xander over her shoulder.

The boy’s expression was unreadable for the most part, but seemed to be a little sad. The surge of guilt for knowing he was the probable cause took Spike by
surprise. He had one more chance to get this right. He still didn’t know what he would say, even what he wanted, but he had to get it right.

“We are just waiting for one more person to-, ah.” Giles turned at the sound of the doorbell. “Anya, please do come in and take a seat. Dawn? If you’ll sit down please.”

Spike extricated himself from Dawn and took up his usual position on the stairs. From there he could see Xander’s face, which he thought may well have been no accident on the boy’s part. There was an empty seat that would have hidden him from Spike’s view, but the boy had left it. Anya took that seat.

“Ah, I know that it isn’t a regular meeting night, so I do appreciate that you have all come.” Spike noted with interest that he too was included with a cursory glance.

“What’s with the formal Giles?” Willow asked. “It sounds like you’ve rehearsed this.”

“Ah, yes, quite. That would be because I have, to a certain extent.”

“Since when did you need a warm up before you talk to us?” Dawn said.
Giles smiled kindly, but brushed off her question. “I have something very important and rather difficult to tell you and I would dearly love to do it with the minimum of interjection.”

Spike took in the watcher’s stance, his head down, hands in his pockets and hesitant movements towards the others at the table. There was a man with a lot on his mind. One look at Xander, and Spike knew he was worried. Xander looked up just then and Spike held his gaze, trying to convey some support. Xander appeared to relax a little as he looked away.

“Giles, maybe if you approach this as if you were ripping off a band-aid, you’ll feel less guilty.” Anya offered.

“Why, thank you, Anya.” Giles gave her the look that he usually reserved for Xander.

“Giles, now I’m worried. Why are you all guilty-watcher?” Willow said as she twisted around to look at him.

“If I might continue?” When they all fell silent Giles went on. “I have decided to go home. Back to Enlgand.” He held up a hand to silence the outburst. “I have made up my mind. I came here to be a watcher and I now I find myself without a-,” Giles sighed. “Without a slayer. I feel the need to move on.”
“But Giles, this is your home. You can’t leave your home,” Willow said, with a pleading voice.

“Willow, while this has more often than not felt like a home, and you people are perhaps more of a family than I ever expected, I really do feel that I belong in England. This has been a difficult time and I would appreciate your understanding.”

Spike looked around the table at the various reactions. Dawn was slumped against Xander’s side, his arm around her shoulders. Willow’s eyes were shining and she looked up at the watcher with a heartbroken expression. The blonde witch was focused on her woman, rubbing calming circles on her back. The boy’s ex demon though, now she was interesting. She sat up straight, as though she were waiting for something else.

Xander stroked his hand over Dawn’s hair and whispered quiet words of support that Spike couldn’t quite make out. The boy’s eyes met his and Spike saw the resignation there. Another loss he wasn’t going to be able to stop.

“But, Giles-,” Willow tried again.

“Please. Let me finish,” Giles said patiently. “I had planned to leave much later, but certain circumstances
presented themselves, and I find I am able to bring my plans forward.”

Dawn’s tiny voice spoke up, muffled against Xander’s shoulder. “When are you going?”

“This coming weekend- Sunday.”

“But what about the shop?” Willow’s voice had changed from sadly pleading to incredulous disbelief. “You’re just going to close the shop?”

“Yes, that would be the circumstance I am referring to. I will retain ownership of the business and Anya will act as manager. It was quite fortuitous that she arrived back when she did. We have completed the necessary paperwork and arrangements, just yesterday.”

From the back, the demon bint looked fit to burst, and Spike knew she wouldn’t contain herself much longer. Right on cue her laugh rang out.

“Oh it couldn’t have been more perfect. I came in, and asked Giles if I could have my job back, because really, who’s going to do it better than me? I actually care about the money, and the making of money. Giles obviously made the right decision. Now that’s all done, I’ll be behind the counter if you need me. Work to do!”
While the girls were out of their seats and fussing over Giles, Xander sat frozen, staring at the chair recently vacated by Anya. Something was wrong, but the boy’s poker face gave away nothing.

Spike wanted nothing more than to haul him out the back and find out what had gotten to him, but they were not in the best company for that. Neither were they in the right place as friends, thanks to his less than stellar performance on Saturday night.

He would have to wait until the boy- no, not a boy, that had been his first mistake- until Xander was ready to leave. Spike eased off the stairs and moved himself closer. As he cut across in front of the table, Xander looked up at Spike, and the despondency was almost enough to make Spike forget the company, forget the broken trust and take him out now.

Spike looked questioningly at him but Xander just shook his head and pushed himself out of his chair to join the girls with Giles.

He saw Xander fix a smile firmly in place as he shook Giles hand. “G-man. You sure you can live without us?”
Giles smiled back. “It will be difficult adjusting to not having my home and pantry, and generally my privacy, invaded at all hours, but I do believe I will cope.”

Xander laughed and gripped Giles’ shoulder. “Your choice, but we’ll miss you.”

“Ah, yes, as will I,” Giles stammered as Dawn echoed Xander’s words and hugged him. Spike recognised that as coming about as close as Giles could to returning the sentiment.

Xander helped Giles loosen Dawn’s teary hold. “Come on, you can hug me, I need one too.” Dawn laughed but wrapped herself around Xander. “Squeeze the stuffing out of me Dawnster, I can take it.”

“Can we do a movie night soon?” Dawn asked, looking up at him with a knowing smile.

Spike caught Dawn’s words and tuned in to hear Xander’s response. The last time she’d requested this, she’d asked for it to be held at the apartment rather than the crypt or her house. Spike wondered how Xander would work around the issue of an invite.

“Oh, geez, I don’t know. Maybe it’s not the best time for that,” Xander said with a quick glance at Spike. “Everybody’s really busy.”
“It’s one night, and it doesn’t even have to be a whole night, just a part of a night and we haven’t done it for a while now so I figure, especially now that Giles is leaving, we all need a bit of cheering up. Come on Xander, please? Don’t make me beg, it’s not pretty.”

“Dawnie, I-.”

“Please?”

Spike suppressed a smile as he saw the moment Xander crumbled. It was the same moment she added an exaggerated pout to those big sad eyes. He knew he would have given in as well.

“You know you don’t play fair, right?” Xander chided.

“I am completely aware, and yet surprisingly regret-free,” Dawn told him happily as her teary eyes miraculously dried. “So this weekend, your place, that’s great. I’ll just go check with Willow.”

Xander, with his mouth still open to answer, watched her dance away and turned back to Spike, keeping his voice low. “Sorry, I couldn’t say no.”

Spike shook his head. “Not to worry, mate. Worse things have happened. We can sort out the details later, when-.”
“Xander,” Anya called across the room beckoning him over.

Xander sighed as she waved a hand for him to join her. Spike then noticed that while the witch was still bothering the watcher, she was also keeping a close eye on Xander. “I need to get out of here now,” he whispered. “Meet me at the bar, okay?” he turned to the others. “Gotta go, sorry, have to meet, um, the guys from work. I’ll see you before you go, Giles.”

Spike watched Xander wave his goodbyes, and wondered if they noticed how he had time to hug the Bit, but dodged the others. The witch spared Spike a curious look when Xander left by himself.

Giles excused himself from Willow, Tara and Dawn and stepped away. “Spike, a word?” He held the training room door open and Spike hesitated before stepping through. “Just some loose ends, if you will.”

“Right then,” Spike said and inched past. Giles came in behind him and shut the door. “What’s on your mind, Watcher?”

Giles looked more uncomfortable than Spike had seen him for a long while. “Spike, it hasn’t escaped my
attention how much you have helped both Dawn and Xander through these past months.”

Spike nodded. “And?”

“And nothing, I merely wanted to acknowledge that.”

“Didn’t do it for your brownie points, Rupert. The boy is-, Xander, is a mate, and I made a promise to the slayer I’d look after the Niblet. No acknowledgement needed, yeah?”

“Be that as it may. I feel confident in leaving, knowing that you are there for them both. Willow and Tara have each other, Anya is quite resilient. I don’t feel I need to worry now, about Xander and Dawn.”

“You don’t.”

“Of course.”

“ Anything else?”

Giles flashed him an annoyed look, but nodded. “Yes, one other thing. Anya has agreed to also manage the, ah, the Buffy Bot. It is vital that it remains in operation, visible to all. I’m sure you appreciate how important this is.”
“Course I do, I might be chipped, but I’m not stupid.” Spike’s expression dared the watcher to contradict him.

“As you say. I was hoping I could ask you to help Anya in that area if she requires it. Willow is, of course prepared to do maintenance, but I’ve no doubt you understand how difficult it is for the others to deal with the Bot.”

Spike didn’t think it was the time to tell him how much he didn’t care about the witch’s personal issues, but had to agree, it was not a job for Xander or Dawn either. As much as it made him cringe to see it, Spike knew the Bot was ultimately his doing and dealing with it now may be some form of penance.

“No problem there. I’ll keep an eye on it.”

“Thank you, Spike.” Giles turned to leave then stopped. “One last thing, if I may. Xander appears to value your, ah, friendship. I’ve not helped but notice. As ill-advised as I might have thought it previously, I have to say he seems better for it. Don’t let him down, Spike.” Giles spoke in that matter-of-fact tone he favoured, but there was a hint of threat that the others rarely saw. The door swung shut as Giles stepped out into the shop.

Don’t let him down, Spike. Too late, Rupert. Spike opened the back door to the alley and lit a cigarette. Yes, he’d let
Xander down, let himself down too. But now was the time to straighten that out. Spike had the time it took to walk to the bar to work out exactly how he would do that.

Part Twenty-Eight

Spike expected to walk in and find Xander at the table with the standard plate of wings and bowl of nuts. The last place he thought to see him was sitting in the car across the street from the bar.

He walked up to the open driver’s window. “Something wrong? Why are you still out here?”

“I know we usually go here on a Tuesday, but shouldn’t we talk about this somewhere else? It’s so crowded in there.”

“Just my opinion, of course, but the fact that there’re people around might help matters a bit, what do you think?”

“You haven’t changed your mind then?”

Spike shook his head. “Can’t say that I have, at this moment.”
Xander sighed and slumped back in the seat “Okay. Let’s go in then.” He locked the car up and followed Spike into the bar.

“How about you find a table, I’ll get the first round.” Spike said, pointing towards the back of the bar. “There’s a few seats back there away from the worst of the crowds.” Xander might not be comfortable with so many people around, but Spike knew it was the best place for them, considering how close things had come last time they were alone.

As he waited, Spike watched Xander choosing a table. Their regular seat was gone and he’d made a beeline for the only other secluded table in a corner that still offered a wall at his back and a direct eye line to the front door. No surprises there. Spike collected their drinks and on second thoughts, picked up a bowl of nuts. He’d noticed Xander liked to have something to do with his hands.

Spike wasn’t looking forward to this. It was obvious Xander wasn’t too impressed with his choice of action. He was pretty sure that Xander would be working to change Spike’s mind; and he wondered if, just maybe, he wanted to let that happen.

Xander took the beer, giving him an apprehensive thanks. “Well this isn’t awkward in any way, is it?”
“Just a night out, mate. We’ve done plenty before and if I can say my piece then I hope there’s plenty to come.”

“I thought you said everything there was to say the other night,” Xander said, with a wry smile.

Spike snorted. “Maybe I said too much and didn’t listen enough.”

“Nah.” Xander shook his head. “Did you mean it though? That you won’t even consider this?”

“Look, you know what I think. I’m just trying to stop you getting hurt down the track.”

“And you’re so sure that’s going to happen?”

Spike threw back a shot of whiskey, then nodded. “Harris, I’m a demon. It’s bound to happen. I have this chip that stops me hurting you physically, but you know how possessive and territorial demons can be. I’m no different.”

“You really don’t want this, do you?”

“Whether I want it or not is beside the point.” And Spike knew he did want it. But there were more important things to consider. “Look, I know you’re angry-.”

“I’m not angry with you, Spike.”
“Could have fooled me,” Spike said with some surprise. “I didn’t exactly get a warm welcome at your place tonight.”

“That wasn’t anger,” Xander said, softly.

“So what was it then?”

“Dunno.” He stroked his fingers up and down the wet sides of the beer glass, tracing patterns in the frost as he thought. “Maybe it was just me not knowing how to deal with the decision I made.”

Spike looked at him warily. “You’ve made a decision? About what?”

“You were right, you know,” Xander said, then picked up his drink. “We should forget it. Friends is working for us, let’s just stick with that.”

Spike just stared. This was the last thing he’d thought to hear. He’d expected arguments, anger, at least a bit of debating. Never had he thought Xander would just cave in like this. “What do you mean? Last thing I heard on Saturday was fuck you, Spike. Now I’m right? What bloody happened in the meantime?”

“I thought about it this time. Seriously thought about it. If we started something here it might be a complete
disaster- or not. Either way, it wouldn’t be something I would be able to hide from Willow. She’d know, straight away.”

The penny dropped for Spike. There was an outcome he’d not considered. “And it’d make it that much harder to stop her then,” he said, nodding. “She’d know you were just bluffing about being on board with this soddin’ spell.” Spike thought about the paper in his pocket. The list Clem said was a fake. He’d have to explain that to Xander, but it could wait. It wasn’t like there was anything they could do about that, but still, it would help to have Xander in the witches’ camp. “I have to agree with you there, mate.”

“At least we agree on something.”

“Now that sounds like there’s something we don’t agree on.”

Xander shook his head. “I don’t think you were right about this thing with us. I mean, so what if we shared a bit of time together when we needed someone? Everything starts somewhere doesn’t it? Where it came from makes no difference. I don’t know if there could be anything more than friends here-, but none of that matters, anyway. It’s a bad time to be starting something just now. You were right about that at least.”
Hearing it laid bare, Spike realised that he’d been reaching. Looking for reasons for the feelings that he had for Xander and knew that he’d grabbed on to the most tenuous of excuses to deny it all. Even so, his intentions at least, had been honest. “I just wanted to keep you from getting hurt.”

“I totally get that. But, I’m not a kid, Spike. And, yeah, I’m human, but I’m not that fragile. Don’t get me wrong, you have no idea how much I appreciate you helping me get through things, but I don’t need to be protected like that.”

“Comes with the territory,” Spike shrugged. “The demon needs to look after you, to keep you safe. Even from me.”

“Some things though, I can decide for myself.”

“That you can, mate.” Spike nodded his agreement. “Moot point anyway, isn’t it? Sounds like you’ve made a decision this time.”

“We both made the same decision, just came at it from different angles.” Xander sat back and toyed with his glass again. “I’m sorry I lost it with you the other night.”
Spike waved off his apology. “Nothing to be sorry for, mate. I told you how it would be and didn’t give you a choice. Just trying too bloody hard, I suppose.”

Xander finished his beer and banged the glass down on the table. “You’re not the only one trying too hard,” he said with a frown.

“Something else going on? That why you left the shop in such a hurry?”

“Anya’s been making these weird comments. She tries to make it sound like a joke, but I’m not so sure. You know how she is.”

Spike knew exactly how she was. If the bint had an idea in her head, she wouldn’t be letting it go any time soon. “What kind of comments?”

“Oh, just stuff about me and her, intimate kind of things you know? It might be okay if we were still together, but now it’s just wrong. She’s doing it in front of Willow and Tara and even Dawn. You know, I think Dawn’s even wondering if Anya and I are back together again.”

Spike felt an angry surge within and quickly tamped it down. “And you haven’t changed your mind on that front?”
“Dammit, Spike. Do you even need to ask me that?”

“Guess not,” Spike said, surprised at the vehement words. “Sorry, I just thought-.”

“Yeah, well, don’t ‘just think’. There might not be any chance of something with you and me, but it doesn’t mean I don’t have-, that I don’t still-.“ Xander sighed. “You know what I mean right? Don’t make me spell everything out. It’s gonna be hard enough.”

Spike knew exactly what he meant. They may have agreed that it was not the time to be exploring new avenues, for whatever reasons, but the feelings were still there. They couldn’t just be switched off.

Spike still wanted nothing more than to take Xander home, lock him away from the stresses of his life and show him just how much he was wanted. He wanted that same thing back from Xander. But for their own individual reasons, for the greater fucking good, they’d both decided against it and would have to just ride it out.

While Spike may have had somewhat more honourable desires, the demon in him was screaming for Spike to just take. Xander wanted him- that much was clear. And Spike wanted Xander, he’d all but admitted it. The demon was angered by the reluctance on both their
parts. And now this admission from Xander that the woman still had designs on him. That kind of thing made for an unhappy demon.

“No, mate, you don’t need to spell it out. I know exactly where you’re coming from.” He sighed. “You think you can stay out of the demon bint’s way till she loses interest?”

Xander gave a bitter laugh. “Don’t think I haven’t tried. I go to the house or the Magic Box and she’s there. Willow even brought her over to the apartment once. You know I could probably ignore the things she’s saying, but every now and then she touches me too, grabs me. I don’t like it. It just makes me feel-.”

“She’s touching you?” Spike leaned forward and gripped Xander’s arm, biting back the growl that threatened. “Grabbing you how?” He could feel the demon’s possessive rage.

Xander very deliberately pulled Spike’s hand off his arm. “You touching me so does not help matters any,” he said, giving Spike’s fingers a light squeeze before dropping his hand. Xander looked up and met Spike’s eyes. From the sudden intake of breath and the quickening of Xander’s pulse, Spike knew what he was about to say. “Spike, your face.”
Spike shut his eyes and concentrated on pushing the enraged demon back. His mind was flooded with images of the woman touching Xander, putting her hands on him, whispering words meant to entice and cajole. Trying to win him back. As hard as he tried, a low growl still rumbled from deep in his chest.

Spike felt a warm hand grip his and rhythmically squeeze his fingers. “Spike, please,” Xander whispered from very close range. “Get it together. Come on.”

He focused on the warmth of the hand on his and the scent of the breath so close to his face, and eventually Spike reined himself in and forced the demon back. Reluctantly, he pulled his hand away and opened his eyes to find Xander leaning into him from across the table. He was so close. Smelled so good. It would take but a second to forget their newly established boundaries and-

Xander snapped out of it first and sat back, leaning away from the table and dropping his hands into his lap. “Damn. Like I said- touching bad.”

Spike sat back and folded his arms, tucking his hands firmly away. “She can’t be touching you.”
Xander sighed. “I’ve told her I’m not interested anymore.”

“As if that’s going to stop her,” Spike snorted. “Never known a woman with such a one-track mind.” Another image of Anya kissing Xander crossed his mind and the growl was out before he knew it.

“Spike, we’re friends, you and me. Just friends. You’ve gotta get a grip on this. You vamp out in the shop when she does something like that and we’re sunk. Willow will know straight up that something’s going on.”

Spike remembered the list. “Think she already might,” he said, and pulled the paper from his pocket.

“What?” Xander’s eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

Spike pushed the list across the table. “Have a look at that.”

Xander reached for it and quickly scanned over the words. “What’s all this? Why is it all crossed out?”

“Clem took that list to everyone he knows. They all said the same thing. Those things towards the bottom of the list? The whole soddin’ lot is fake.”
“How do you mean, fake?” Xander asked, frowning and reading over the list again.

“None of those things exist, mate. Your witch made them up.”

“So the list isn’t real?” Spike hated to see the hurt on Xander’s face as he considered the possibilities. “She set me up?”

“I can’t tell you what’s in her head. Maybe she’s just covering her bases. Maybe she suspects you. I’ve no idea, sorry. But fact is, that is not the real list and if she’s done this, I doubt we’ve got any way to get the real one from her now.”

“Spike, if she knows-.”

“I doubt she does. I have a feeling she might have just put this out there to test the waters. If she knew you were onto her, I bet she would’ve called your bluff by now. This thing is too important to her.”

“So she let me find it to see what I would do with it? But she doesn’t know I made a copy. She can’t know we’ve been asking around, unless-. Spike, what if she deals with the same people Clem showed this to?”
“Unlikely, mate. Those folk wouldn’t deal with humans. The witch would be sourcing from somewhere else.”

Xander dropped his forehead into his hands. “So what do we do now?”

“You need to keep on her. Don’t let on that you know. Stick to the plan.”

He gave a short sharp bark of laughter. “We’ve got no plan.”

“Well, no, not as such,” Spike conceded. “But at least you’ve still got a foot in the door. Anything at all she lets slip, you bring it to me and we’ll put the pieces together, yeah?”

“I guess we’re back to square one.”

“Yeah,” Xander said with a tired voice. “Are we going to be able to stop this now?”

“Chin up, mate. We’ll do the best we can.”

“With Giles gone, she’s got access to anything she wants in the Magic Box, you know.”

“True, but she’d have to be careful about your ex. They’re not exactly best mates, are they? And she still won’t want to let the cat out of the bag.”

“I guess we’re back to square one.”
“Something will show itself. Just keep your eyes open, yeah?”

Xander nodded with little conviction and Spike had to wonder if maybe his lack of faith wasn’t too far off. They were back to the beginning again. Except now they knew they had a suspicious witch to deal with; as well as a presumptuous, hands on ex-demon; and an attraction to each that was going to be pushed aside.

Spike hoped that despite all that, Xander would be able to keep up his façade long enough for them to find a way to stop the spell.

Part Twenty-Nine

Again Spike found himself waiting, not lurking, outside Xander’s apartment. It wasn’t lurking if a bloke was standing about making a decision. Even if that decision was already made and he was just drawing it out. That still wasn’t lurking. Spike didn’t lurk. Except for when he
did and was trying to cover for it. *Now*, being a prime example.

Bloody hell. He’d been invited for fuck’s sake. There’d been a note under his door in the boy-, no, in *Xander’s* handwriting on Friday afternoon- ‘*Sorry I can’t go to the bar tonight, Willow wants me there. Movie with Dawn at my place tomorrow night?*’.

That was an invitation. But Spike knew it didn’t constitute enough of one to get him across the threshold. For that to happen it would mean him standing at the door, knocking on the door, waiting at the door- not lurking. It would mean Xander would have to open the door and decide. Make the decision he’d, for whatever reason, never made before.

Realistically, Spike had no reason to expect a refusal. But what if he got one? What would he do? Bloody. Idiot. It wasn’t going to happen. Xander had written the note. He wouldn’t have even told Spike if he didn’t want him in there. He dropped another cigarette butt into the pile still lying there from Tuesday night, now slightly bigger for all tonight’s lurk-, *waiting*.

Spike hated this part of who he was. It was like offering your friends a survey and asking them to tick the box ‘*Do you really like me?*’. Except this time, it wouldn’t be far
off if the box actually said, ‘tick here if you like me and are willing to take the risk that I won’t come back and kill you in your sleep.’ Always a bit of a gamble for a human, even with the chip as security.

Xander wouldn’t have asked him if he didn’t want him in there. And Xander had asked him, in a round about way. Movie with Dawn at my place tomorrow night- question mark. Spike felt the note in his back pocket, nestled next to his lighter and the fake spell list. He pulled it out, stuffing the list back in as it came too. It was that question mark. If that wasn’t there then it might just be a bit of information. Hey I’m having Dawn over. Not you, just Dawn. It was that little, badly formed, curling, half inch of inferred invitation.

Spike shook another cigarette out of the pack and lit it. What if he’d inferred wrong? They hadn’t spoken since the bar on Tuesday night. The same Tuesday night when they’d as good as admitted to each other that they had a thing- God, he even thought like them now- that they were attracted to each other. Where that attraction stemmed from was an argument for another time. What they were going to do about it was not. Set it aside, focus on what needed to be done now.
But what about when this was done? When they didn’t have to worry about Willow finding out. When they’d stopped that abomination of an idea and made sure the slayer would rest. Would they still have to ignore the feelings they had? Would they still have them? No, Willow was Xander’s excuse. Spike still had his reservations. He would still be that possessive demon after all was said and done. There would still be the potential for hurt on both sides. Too much potential to gamble with.

Spike was jerked out of his thoughts by the sound of a familiar engine drawing near. As the witch pulled up to the kerb, Spike stepped out of the darker shadows and onto the sidewalk.

“Spike!” The expected squeal came as Dawn launched herself from the car and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Hello, Bit.” Spike carefully hugged her, holding his lit cigarette away, and watching over her shoulder as the two witches got out and locked up the car.

“Oh, my god, what did you do? Smoke the whole carton at once?” Dawn theatrically held her nose and kissed his cheek. “Stinky smoking guy.”
“Leave off, pet, it’s not that bad.”

“Not that bad? How many have you had? I think I could get lung cancer just from smelling your coat.”

Spike caught her grin and smiled back. “Cheeky brat.”

“Come on, let’s go in, Xan must be waiting.” Dawn ran on ahead, leaving Spike time to feed a few lines to Willow.

“Red.” He nodded to her, ignoring the blonde one as she stepped partially behind Willow.

“Spike,” she said with the confidence and disdain of one who knows they’re relatively safe.

He got up close in her face, taking care not to touch her, the burn from last time still clear in his mind. “You might have gotten him over to your way of thinking, but I’m still on your tail. Not gonna let you do this to the slayer.”

Willow rolled her eyes. “Spike, this is getting boring. What can you do? No, really, tell me, cause I’m all ears. Do you know what spell we’re using? Do you know when? Do you know how? Do you know where?” Willow took a smaller step forward and held a finger to his chest. “Do you think you can even touch me, touch either of us?”
Spike felt the burn through his shirt and jerked back, rubbing the spot on his chest. “You’ll get yours witch. You might have conned Xander, probably got him under some kind of spell to agree-.”

The air crackled and stirred. “I would never spell Xander. Never.” Spike could have sworn there was a subtle change to her face, but it was gone before he could focus.

“Must have done something to make him go along with this plan of yours. He won’t even listen to me anymore.”

“Come on, you guys,” Dawn called as she held open the main door.

“That’s because he knows we can do this and get her back. Its only you, Spike. Alone. Just you trying to stop us and that’s never going to happen.” Willow took a step back and smiled brightly. “Coming Dawnie!” she called. “Now, Spike. If there’re no more empty threats from you, I’m going upstairs to see Xander. Come on, sweetie.” She grabbed Tara’s hand and they headed off to the building.

Spike turned to follow. Damn it if she wasn’t right. What did he know? Nothing. Nothing more than the fact that they needed three people and that she was guarding the true spell with her life.
He stopped. *Three* people. She still needed three people. So long as she didn’t *truly* get to Xander, they still wouldn’t be able to do this. They still had a card up their sleeve. Best mention that to Xander tonight, might cheer him up a bit.

Spike took the stairs two at a time and arrived at the door just behind the girls. Dawn was already knocking. “Open up, Xan, come on.”

“Hey, Dawnie,” Xander said as he opened the door and took in the unlikely group in the corridor. “You guys all arrive at the same time, huh?”

“As luck would have it,” Spike mumbled, running his fingers over the burn on his chest.

Xander smiled as Dawn and Tara went inside, and he returned Willow’s hug, never taking his eyes off Spike. “Hey, Will.”

Willow glanced back over her shoulder at Spike as she went inside and disappeared into the living room.

“Spike.” Xander smiled warmly.

Spike’s eyes fixed on the slow curving of Xander’s mouth and he felt a heat radiating through him. Oh yeah. Now that feelings had been acknowledged and aired, ignoring
this was going to be a walk in the park. As long as that park was strewn with landmines and bear traps and abandoned mine shafts. A real walk in the park.

“Harris.” Spike hoped he’d kept his wayward thoughts well concealed, but maybe not.

Xander gave a long heavy sigh and spoke quietly. “I know we need to do this, but I think it’s going to be a bit closer to the hard side of things than I expected.”

Truer words were never spoken. Spike pointed back over his shoulder. “If you want me to go-.”

“No!” Xander had reached out a hand to stop him, but let it fall back to his side. “I really don’t.”

“I’ll stay then.” So, here it was. The reason Spike had stood outside, waiting, deciding. Xander’s move next.

Again there was that smile, and if the sight of it warmed and twisted his insides this much, then Spike could only imagine what its touch would do for his lips. That was absolutely one hell of a park he was going to be strolling through. Spike very reluctantly dragged his eyes away and met Xander’s.

“You might want to make those blue again before the girls see.” Xander pointed to Spike’s face. “Not that I
mind in the slightest, but it would probably just cause trouble with Will.”

Spike shook his head and took a deep breath to regain his calm. “Be a damn sight easier if you’d stop bloody smiling at me like that,” he mumbled.

“Soon as you stop looking at me like that.” Xander tried to straighten his face out into something neutral. His eyes though, were burning a hole through the core of Spike.

Xander stepped back and held his arm out. “Spike, would you please come inside.”

There it was. Simpler than he’d thought. Much less dramatic than he’d expected. Just a friend extending the hand of welcome. As Spike walked through there was a brushing of shoulders and knuckles that he sincerely doubted was an accident and he found he didn’t care in the slightest. Yeah. A soddin’ minefield.

Xander closed the door behind him and gave him a small smile. “Welcome to my place.”

Spike returned the smile. “Thanks, mate.”

“So, um, blood’s in the fridge.”
“You got blood in?”

“I stopped off yesterday and got a couple of bags, sorry its not today’s.” Xander pointed to the kitchen. “Cups there, microwave there, just help yourself. I need to see the girls.”

Spike didn’t really want blood at the moment, but fussing around in the kitchen was better than making fake small talk with the witches for Dawn’s sake. Well, that and the knowledge that him drinking a cup of blood in front of Red would not go down at all well. A bloke had to score his points where he could.

Spike peeled off his coat and slung it over the back of a chair. It was an open and smallish apartment, and he could hear everything going on in the living room.

“So, Will, what are you doing tonight? Big plans?” Xander said with impressively fake cheeriness.

“Not so much with the big and planny, more with the dull and boring. We’re going to the Magic Box to help Anya and Giles. Anya wants to do a clean out of old spell ingredients in stock and even though he’s leaving tomorrow, Giles wants to be there. He doesn’t trust her not to throw it all out and just reorder everything.”
“Great. Sounds like something I am sincerely happy to not be a part of. Glad you counted me out.”

“I look after my Xander. And, I look after my Dawnie. We’ll be back to pick her up when we’re finished.”

_My Xander._ The low growl was out before he could stop it. Spike put down the blood bag and gripped the counter with both hands. The demon was railing at him to correct the witch, he was not _her_ Xander. Spike closed his eyes and focused in on Xander’s voice, his heartbeat, hearing the subtle hints in his voice that told Spike Xander was battling to be civil.

“Oh, no need, she can stay here.”

“Oh I can field this one.” Dawn’s voice piped up and Spike could tell she was less than amused as she recited, “Dawn isn’t allowed to sleep over at Xander’s because she broke curfew last night with Janice. By one measly hour.”

“Curfew is curfew Dawnie. You have to stick to the rules.” That was the blonde witch, Spike couldn’t recall hearing so many words from her all at once.

Enter Niblet, stage right, in full whine mode. “That is so unfair, it was only an hour and it’s not like I can get in any trouble tonight is it? I mean, not with Spike and Xander?”
As if they’re gonna let me out.” Spike laughed as he caught a glimpse of Willow’s harassed expression.

“And that’s our cue to leave,” Willow said. “Dawn we’ll be back later, maybe you can stay over next time.”

“Whatever.” Spike heard the huff as the girl threw herself onto a sofa. He didn’t even need to lean around the corner, he could easily picture the pout and folded arms, probably feet up on the coffee table.

“Bye, Dawnie,” Willow called, as Xander led her and Tara to the door.

Demon subdued for the meantime, Spike wandered from the kitchen with a glass, rather than a mug, of warm blood, deliberately holding it up to the light where Willow couldn’t help but see it. Her lip curled and if looks could kill-, well, Spike was already dead.

“Night, Red,” Spike raised the glass to her.

Willow turned away from him and hugged Xander. “You and Dawnie have fun, we’ll be back later. Call me if you need anything, Xan.”

“I’ll be fine thanks. Nothing to worry about.”
Spike smirked at the attempted slight and downed the blood, making sure it stained his lips. He let his face partly slip as she gave him a final glance on her way out the door.

Xander shut the door behind her, slumped back against it and collected himself before joining Dawn.

“Right, that’s the rules makers out of the way,” he said, dusting his hands. “Let’s have fun. Dawnie, get on the phone, there’s pizza needs ordering. I want a drink.”

Xander tossed the menu and the phone to Dawn and joined Spike in the kitchen, pulling a beer from the fridge.

“God, it’s hard to be happy all the time around her when I know what she’s planning.”

“Have to say, you’re doing a bloody good job of it.”

“Thanks. You know sometimes I almost forget. Then she gets this look in her eye that I’ve never seen before and she’s not my Willow anymore. I don’t know what she is.”

“Yeah, she’s something new I’ll give you that,” Spike mused, absently rubbing at his chest.
“Spike?” Xander put his beer down on the counter. “What’s wrong with your chest? There’s a mark on your shirt.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just the witch flexing her muscles.”

“She burned you again, didn’t she?” Xander closed the gap between them and examined the singe on Spike’s shirt, his fingers running back and forth across it. “Let me see.” His other hand reached for the hem of the t-shirt and pulled it from Spike’s jeans.

“I don’t think that’s the best idea you’ve ever had, mate,” Spike said gently, and pulled his shirt from Xander’s hand. “Really don’t.” He took Xander’s other hand from his chest and laid it on the counter next to the forgotten beer bottle.

Xander blushed and met his eyes. “Um, right. Sorry. Yeah, it’s a bad idea. Bad touching, not that touching you is bad, it’s good, but no, it’s bad, I shouldn’t-.” Xander took a deep breath. “If we’re just friends it shouldn’t be a problem should it? You’re hurt, I’m checking. That’s something friends do.”

“So let’s wait till this has blown over and we are just friends again. Then you can check all the burns you need to. Nothing to worry about then, eh?”
Xander nodded, but his eyes were still on the darker circle on Spike’s shirt. “Are you okay though? Why did she do that?”

“It’s nothing, be gone in a couple of hours thanks to this.” Spike raised the glass of blood. “And that was just her reminding me she thinks there is sod all I can do to stop her.”

“She’s right though isn’t she? If we don’t have the right list, what can we do?”

Spike smiled. “Like you said- we’re back to square one. She still needs three people. And as long as she thinks she has you and as long as you don’t jump ship on me, she won’t be able to go ahead.”

“Jump ship? You think I’m gonna change my mind about this? No way. Spike, if I ever change my mind, it’s because she’s done something to me. And, god, I hope she never does. I can forgive her a lot, but not that.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry, she lost control a bit when I suggested that. I think you’re safe there.”

“Well that’s something.”

“She won’t-.” Spike turned as he heard Dawn approaching. “Food on the way, Bit?”
“Yep. So, are you two gonna stand in there gossiping all night, or can we get this party started? The movie’s in.”

Spike smiled at her. “I think the little lady wants to party. What do you think, Harris?”

“I think you could be right,” Xander laughed and it was a sound Spike knew he could never get enough of.

Before Dawn could even register his movement, Spike had snatched her up and slung her, squealing, over his shoulder. The high-pitched noises hurt his ears, but he was glad to finally be off the topic of witches and spells and resurrected slayers. Doubly glad to have the small warm body of the Bit between him and Xander as he tossed her down and they all crowded together onto the sofa in front of the TV.

As Xander smiled at him from the other end of the sofa and Dawn snuggled into his side, Spike wondered why they didn’t have more nights like this one. A bloke could get well used to it.
Part Thirty

Oh, yuck, Spike, now you smell even worse.” Dawn theatrically held her nose as he dropped back down beside her onto the sofa. “Do you have to smoke so much?”

Spike had taken the opportunity for a smoke or two while he’d taken their empty pizza boxes down to the trash. “Course I do. Not like it’ll kill me and I bloody enjoy it. Now start the film again, this is a good one.”

Dawn snatched the remote off the coffee table and hid it behind her back. “I’ll start it when you move.”

“Move where?” he asked. “There’s no other bloody seats.”

“Well, you should have thought of that before, mister. Now you’re all stinky and it makes my nose itch.” Spike smiled at her. Amazing how the kid could look just like her big sis when she pulled that self righteous face.

He folded his arms and put his feet up on the table. “You move then if you don’t like it, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Xander!” Dawn yelled into the kitchen. “Spike just threatened to bite me.”
“Spike, don’t get any blood on the sofa, okay?” Xander shouted back from the sink where he was stacking plates and cups from their meal.

“Won’t spill a drop, mate.”

Spike turned a grin on her, and Dawn rolled her eyes. “Well, he might be on your side, but you still smell funky and I’m not sitting next to you.” Dawn snatched up all the loose cushions from the sofa and threw herself down onto the floor. “If Xander thinks you’re so funny, he can sit there. You’re a big couch hog anyway, Spike.”

Xander came back from the kitchen and looked apprehensively at the space next to Spike. “Geez, Dawnie, he doesn’t smell bad, come back up here, I need someone to lean on.”

“Spike’s up there, you can lean on him, seeing as you like his stinkiness so much.”

With a cautious glance at Spike, Xander sat himself down, squeezing against the arm of the sofa so as to leave as much space between them as he possibly could.

“You know, Niblet, a bloke could develop a bloody complex with you talking like that.”
She gave him that look that only a worldly wise teenage girl can give. “Are you the big bad or a big baby? Now shush, movie’s back on.”

Spike laughed to himself. There was definitely some of the slayer in that attitude. A quick look over at Xander’s wistful expression, told him they’d been having similar thoughts. Xander just shrugged and smiled.

Spike checked the clock. Twenty minutes in and still another two hours to go. And even though it wasn’t cigarettes, Spike liked the way Xander smelled too. Sitting together on the sofa for that long without Dawn as a buffer would be another huge hurdle in the effort to get past their ‘thing’.

Except for the odd scratch, Xander kept his arms folded, his hands tucked neatly away. Spike did the same.

Xander’s right leg was crossed and pointing away from Spike- no chance of an accidental bump there.

On a normal night, Spike would have been most comfortable slouched, knees wide, arms along the back of the sofa, but not today. He sat uncomfortably still, legs crossed opposite to Xander’s and his eyes remained focused on the screen.
For all intents and purposes, it would appear he was oblivious to Xander’s presence. At least, that’s what he hoped.

In reality he was aware of every movement, every breath, every variation in heartbeat. He easily picked up the scent of attraction that no amount of self restraint would conceal. The heat radiated from Xander’s side and Spike could feel it on his bare arm and through the thin t-shirt. Maybe if he’d thought to leave his coat on that would have been one less thing to try to ignore.

The movie he’d originally been enjoying soon became mere background noise as he let himself drift and take in all that was coming to him from the other end of the sofa. Spike wondered if Xander was as engrossed in the film as he seemed.

Slowly, Spike uncrossed his legs and arms and stretched. His gaze flicked to Xander but really there was no need. As soon as he’d moved, and shifted the slightest amount towards the centre of the sofa, he wondered no more.

Xander’s heart rate increased and Spike was hit with a wave of interest so thick he immediately had to cross his legs and fold his hands in his lap, silently cursing himself for having left his coat so far away. Not that he could have got that into his lap in any discreet kind of way.
Spike tried to tune out everything else and focus on the movie, but with the demon rattling his cage, it was a lost cause.

How had either of them thought this movie night was a good idea? Yeah, maybe, back before they’d acknowledged IT. But how could they, in all seriousness, expect things to be the same? To be their kind of normal. Spike knew there were going to have to be some changes.

There were more drinks and popcorn and the rest of the movie passed in a blur. Eventually, Spike was aware of conversation from Dawn and stilted answers from Xander and shook himself out of it.

“Well that must have been a good choice, behold the lack of popcorn.” Dawn waved her hand at the floor in front of the television.

“Yeah, Bit. Nice film, that one,” Spike said as he stood and headed for the kitchen for a bag of blood. A few minutes away from the boy would help him get his head together again. Might even settle the demanding demon.

“Xander?”

“Well you didn’t hear a peep out of me, so I give it ten thumbs up.”
“Were you even watching? Every time I looked at you tonight you were staring off somewhere else.”

“Oh, sure I was watching, mostly,” Xander said and Spike could hear the girl’s disapproving tuts from the kitchen. “I just have a few things on my mind. Work and stuff, you know.”

Spike looked up in time to catch the sideways glance from Xander and knew that work had been the last thing on his mind. He was in no position to point fingers, though. Spike was just glad that Dawn hadn’t started a discussion on the film; he couldn’t have told her a damn thing.

When Dawn excused herself and disappeared into the bathroom, Xander came to the kitchen and poured a glass of coke.

“What did you think of the movie?” Xander asked.

“Me? Oh it, ah, it was-.” Then Spike saw Xander’s smile behind the glass at his lips and laughed. “Yeah okay, you got me. I have no bloody idea what the movie was about.”

“Me either,” Xander said, still smiling. He leaned back against the counter and his smile gradually faded. “I know it’s just bad timing right now, and you think there’s
all these other reasons we should just say no. But do you think, I mean, would you-.” Xander sighed. “If it was different. Would you-.”

“Don’t dwell, mate. It doesn’t help. Anyway, it’s not different. It is the way it is. And even if there weren’t the issues of the witch and the spell, there’s still the demon. I’m always gonna be the demon.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Xander sipped at his drink. “Just for the record though. I know there’re the other things, and I know this isn’t going to happen, and I’m almost okay with that, but the whole thing about the demon? I really don’t care. It’s not an issue for me.”

“Right,” Spike said, pointing at Xander with his blood-filled mug. “Which means it has to be for me, because you’re just not clued in enough to be worried about it.”

“You didn’t just call me clueless, did you?” Xander said, slowly lowering his glass.

“No, course I bloody well didn’t. I just meant that you don’t completely understand the demon, that’s why you’re not worried as much as I am.”

“But if you’d tell me more, then-.”
“Then maybe you’d understand but we’re still in the same place, aren’t we?”

“I wonder if we shouldn’t do this again? Movie nights, bar nights. I want to but it’s too hard.”

“ Might get easier.”

“Can’t see how it would.”

Spike nodded. Xander was right. How on earth could they get past this thing if they were sitting around bars and living rooms socialising like nothing was different. Everything was different.

The sharp knock at the front door interrupted them.

“That’ll be the witch,” Spike said and to calm the demon, freshly enraged by the witch’s arrival, he concentrated on very slowly drinking his blood, while Xander went to get the door.

“Hi, guys.” Spike wondered if the girls could hear the same sad tone that he could.

When he heard more than two sets of feet come in, Spike put his mug down and looked around the corner. Behind the witches, Xander’s ex was coming through the
door. Xander caught Spike’s eye, shrugged and tried to dodge the woman’s outstretched hand.

“Hey Xan, is Dawnie ready?” Willow asked, turning away when she saw Spike come out of the kitchen.

“Yeah I’m ready,” Dawn whined as she came out of the bathroom, giving Spike and Xander a curious glance. “Still don’t know why I can’t stay here.”

“Next time, okay?” Xander said. “Willow’s looking after you, you need to mind her now.”

“I don’t need looking after that much,” Dawn pouted.

“How about you go wait in the car with Tara,” Willow said. “I just want to talk to Xan for a minute, okay?”

“Yeah fine, whatever.” Dawn hugged Xander and Spike tighter than usual, thanked them, then let Tara put an arm around her shoulders and lead her out to the stairs.

As soon as they were gone, Anya threw herself at Xander and pulled him into a hug. “Hey there,” she said in a breathless voice.

Spike saw the discomfort on Xander’s face as he tried to step away from her and she merely clung tighter. He felt the jealous surge within and bit back the growl. Xander
had managed to unwind her arms and was inching his way closer to Spike.

“What are you doing here, Anya?” Xander said trying to put more distance between them.

“Um, Xan, Anya just wanted to come and say hi,” Willow said. “She needs to pick up some things from our place on her way back.”

The demon woman had shoved her hands in her back pockets and thrust out her less than impressive chest as she bumped herself into Xander’s side, pushing him away from Spike. “I like what you’ve done with the apartment, Xan.”

Spike knew he would lose it if he witnessed much more, and though he was loathe to leave Xander to the two women, he knew he needed to get away from her. Spike grabbed his duster and swung it on.

“I’ll be downstairs keeping an eye on the Niblet. She shouldn’t be out in the dark alone.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his lighter. A smoke wouldn’t go astray either. As he walked towards the door Spike heard something soft hit the floor behind him. As he turned to look, he saw the demon bint was already onto it, picking up the folded sheet of paper.
“Something fell out of your pocket, Spike,” she said, glancing at the paper. “What’s this?” Anya asked, looking at the red scribble on the page as it unfolded a fraction.

“Anya, you need to give that back to Spike,” Xander told her and reached out for the paper with a panicked look at Spike.

She had Red’s spell list. “Right I’ll take that thanks.” Spike made to snatch it from her hand, but she had already turned away from them and was reading aloud.

“An Irnyks Disk? A Vosvnic Crucible?” Anya gave a high pitched laugh. “Is this a joke spell? There’s no such thing as the Mark of Clostanial either.” Anya’s laughter continued, but there was silence from everybody else.

The witch’s face was strangely calm, but Spike thought he could feel a light charge beginning to ripple through the air.

Xander’s face reflected his abject horror. He looked from Spike to Willow, then to Anya who was still reading over the list.

“Someone’s got a sense of humour,” she said, laughing again, but then stopped when she realised no one else was joining in. “What’s going on here?”
Willow reached out and took the list from Anya’s hand. She glanced over it, folded the page and put it in her bag. “I think I just found out everything I needed to know,” she said quietly and smiled at Xander.

The look on her face and the spark in the air chilled Spike and he automatically moved to Xander’s side. This was about to get ugly and he was glad the girl was downstairs, away from the blast zone.

**Part Thirty-One**

“Xander, you said that paper was Spike’s. Why does Willow have it in her bag now?” Anya asked.

Willow’s eyes never left Xander as she spoke. “Anya, would you mind checking on Tara and Dawn? I’ll be down in just a minute.”

“Am I going to miss something? This was my apartment, you know. I have a right to be here if something is about to happen, especially if it’s to Xander.”

Spike could feel the charge building in the air, and if he could, then surely the demon woman could as well. If the way she was rubbing at her arms was any indication, then perhaps she was sensing it. Spike didn’t really care if she was or she wasn’t, he just wanted her gone.
The way she looked at Xander, the way she clung to him—Spike’s demon was itching to get at her, to remind her that she had no business touching him anymore. He was keeping a tight rein, but every movement from the woman, every cringe from Xander brought forth barely contained howls from within Spike.

Willow adjusted her face into what Spike assumed was intended to be a reassuring smile.

“Anya, please. Everything’s fine and nothing’s going to happen. I just need to speak to Spike and Xan for a minute is all.”

“Xander?” Anya said, but she was already backing away towards the door, still brushing at her bare skin.

“It’s fine,” Xander told her. “Go check on the girls, okay? I’ll see you later.”

Anya nodded, gave a cautious wave and pulled the front door closed behind her. As soon as it shut, Willow spun around, pulled the paper from her bag and waved it.

“You lied to me, Xander,” she said in a hurt and accusing voice.
“Oi, Red. What do you call planting that thing?” Spike pointed at the list. “You’ve not been up front either have you?”

Xander shook his head at Spike and Spike understood that Xander wanted to handle this himself. Good luck to him if he was going to try and make that witch see reason. Spike would leave him to try, but one wrong move from her and he would step in.

“Spike, this would be a good time for you to shut up and let me talk to my-.” She cocked her head and looked sadly at Xander. “Are we even friends now?”

“Of course we’re friends. Why do you think I’m trying to stop this?” Xander put a hand out to her, but she backed away.

“I think you’re trying to stop it because you have a bored, leashed vampire whispering in your ear, and he doesn’t want the slayer back on his turf.”

Spike bit off yet another growl. “You’re out of line, witch.”

Willow took a sideways step around Xander. “Am I, Spike? Why would you want Buffy back? She never did anything but kick your ass, anyway. She rejected you. You
weren’t good enough for her. She beat you time and again. But you kept coming back for more.”

“Willow, that’s enough!” Xander said. “This isn’t you.”

“It isn’t me?” she said incredulously. “I’ve been honest with you. I told you I wanted to bring her back, I can bring her back. I told you I need you to do it.”

“You showed me a fake spell, Will. That’s not honest.”

“And you made a copy and gave it to Spike. Do you really think I would tell you about the actual spell when you’re so buddy-buddy with him? I wanted to, but I didn’t know if I could trust you, Xan, and I was right.”

“You’re my best friend. You can trust me. I wasn’t trying to trick you; I just want to help you.”

Willow shook her head and laughed. “You help me by stealing information, giving it to Spike of all people and trying to stop me from saving Buffy?”

“Bloody hell, witch. You are not saving the slayer. You have no idea where she is, you have no idea what messing around with those kinds of powers could do to her or you.”
Spike kept his eye on Xander as he tried approaching her again, but the witch was on edge and backing off. “Will, I just want you to stop and think. You can’t do this. I can’t let you do this. Yeah, Spike has been helping me, because I couldn’t think of a way to get through to you. You’ve made me do it.”

Spike felt the crackle of magic in the air and Willow’s hair ruffled despite there being no breeze in the apartment. “I made you? I made you sneak around behind my back with him? I made you lie to me? I made you pretend to be my friend and pretend to want to help? No Xander. I didn’t make you do anything.”

Spike had to give Xander credit. The witch was bristling with energy and indignation but he was keeping his calm. But it was clear it was only a surface calm, and Spike could hear the heartbeat racing and detect the poorly concealed hurt and worry his voice. In her agitated state, Spike doubted the witch had even noticed.

“But Will, you did. You wouldn’t listen, you still won’t listen. I don’t want you to hurt Buffy. I don’t want you to hurt yourself. If this all goes wrong, you have to try to live with the results, and I don’t want that to happen.”

“You have so little faith in me that you think I would do this if I wasn’t sure?”
Spike tried to leave it to Xander, she was *his* friend after all, but her arrogance irked him and the demon chafed at the idea of the slayer returning. His control was slipping. “Red, this spell takes a lot of bloody power, you can’t control the likes of it.”

“Spike.” Willow’s face twisted into a hard glare. “You don’t know anything about me and what I can do. This is none of your business. You weren’t Buffy’s friend, she didn’t even like you. And how many times did you try to kill her? Now you turn *my* friend against me and try to stop me saving her. And you know what I think? I think that you’ve been neutered and now you’re trying to make a grab for whatever you can to feel useful. You don’t care what happens to Buffy or to Xander. You just want to influence something and take away from us because you’re *nothing* now.”

Spike took a step towards her, but the warning on her face was enough. He couldn’t touch her and if he tried he would be in no fit state to help Xander. He snarled. “If I didn’t have this chip-.”

“But you do.”

Xander was standing with his mouth agape as he listened to the words coming from his best friend. “Willow, what’s happened to you? Buffy wouldn’t want this, she
wouldn’t want to see you like this. Stop now, before it goes too far.”

Willow rounded on Xander and it was then Spike was sure he saw something flow over her face. Some odd, lined, discolouring that was gone in an instant, just like the charge in the air. “Don’t tell me what Buffy would want. How do you know? Why wouldn’t she want me to get her back? We’re waiting for her- Dawn and Giles, and you and me.” Willow’s voice caught on the last word and Spike could see her eyes welling up. “Xander, I need her back, she’d want me to do this. I have to try.”

“No” Xander said softly and reached for her as her tears fell. “I know how much you miss her. But she wouldn’t want that, she’d know what could go wrong, she wouldn’t want you to risk it.”

Willow’s eyes flashed angrily and she pulled away from Xander. “You’re doing it again. You’re saying I can’t do this.”

“I don’t know if you can. But what if you can’t? You have to think about what might happen.”

“No, Xander, I don’t.” She wiped at her eyes with her sleeve. “Because I can do it!” she shouted. “And I will.”
Spike stepped up beside Xander to present a united front. “We’re not going to let you, Red.”

Willow laughed and wiped the last tears away. “You can’t stop me Spike.”

“Maybe not, but I can give it a bloody good try.”

Willow waved the list again. “Looks like you already did and failed,” she said with a smirk, then added acidly, “but that’s just like you isn’t it?”

“Bloody stupid woman!” Spike shouted, losing the tenuous hold he had on his patience. “We’re trying to help you, you arrogant-.”

“Spike no, please,” Xander interrupted, putting a restraining hand on Spike’s shoulder. “Don’t make it wor-."

“Leave it, Xander, the silly bint needs to be told.” Spike shrugged Xander off and approached Willow, all thoughts of consequences gone and only the hurt he could feel coming from Xander, and the sheer arrogance of the witch was in the forefront of his mind as the demon pushed its way out. He pointed his finger in her face and let his features shift. “You’ve got the boy here worried sick about you, the slayer and the girl. But you don’t care, do you? You’re so full of yourself you can’t see what’s
going to happen. *Get your head out of your arse.* Everyone misses her. Everyone is hurting. But you can’t use that as a bloody excuse. Look at what you’re about to do to someone you keep claiming is your friend. End this now, or chip be damned, I will stop you!”

Willow took one step closer and struck Spike across the face. It was a glancing blow, he hardly felt the impact, but it was the burning of her palm against his skin that made him snarl in pain.

“No!” Xander shouted, as he grabbed Willow’s arm.

Willow pulled out of Xander’s grip and rounded on Spike. “Don’t you dare speak about my grief. What would you know?” Quickly, she closed the gap between them and reached out again, laying her hand flat on his chest. Spike could feel the penetrating burn and smell the singed fabric and skin. Her harsh whisper reached only Spike’s ears. “I can end you now. You could be dust in seconds if I-.”

“Willow no!” Xander bellowed and put himself between her and Spike, pushing Willow back. His eyes flicked to Spike’s chest as Spike smothered the smoldering edges on the hole in the front of his shirt. “Are you okay?”
Spike shook his demon’s face away and nodded at Xander. “No real damage done.” The hand-size mark on his chest still burned, but Spike wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of knowing that.

Willow tried to push Xander aside. “He’s not going to stop this. Neither are you. Get out of my way, Xander.”

She tried to get around him, but Xander grabbed both her hands, pleading with her, his voice filled with his distress. “No, this isn’t how we do things, we don’t attack, and we don’t kill.”

Willow frowned and shook her head. “But we do Xander. Or have you forgotten? Why do we all stay on the Hellmouth? Because we kill vampires. He’s just another one.”

Spike growled at her from the other side of the kitchen. “You’re not fucking touching me again, you-.”

“Spike, please, just let me deal with this. Please?” Xander turned back to Willow and Spike could hear how hard he was working to keep his voice calm. “Buffy trusted him with Dawn, he’s a friend now. He’s my friend.”

“You want him for a friend that’s your business.” Her face was twisted with hurt and anger. “But he’s not mine, now get out of my way.”
Xander refused to move and Spike could see that any calm Xander had, was quickly being overshadowed by panic as he lost control of the situation and the witch’s anger built. “Will, this has nothing to do with him. This is between you and me.”

“No, Xander, it was, but then Spike butted in and convinced you Buffy isn’t worth saving.”

“Where is this coming from?” Xander said, shaking his head. “You think I can’t make up my own mind about something like this? Willow, I don’t want it. I went to Spike because I didn’t want it. I asked for help to stop you. Spike is supporting me.”

Willow’s voice had dropped and was now low and steady with false calm. There were occasional flickers of black in her eyes and again that strange rippling of her skin. Every mention of his name, every reference Xander made to Spike, was increasing her anger and Spike could feel the charge building in the air.

The witch was refusing to believe her friend would go against her of his own free will. She’d latched onto the only other thing that made sense to her in her grief and that was Spike. Spike was not scared of her for himself as much as he was for Xander’s sake, she was so tightly wound as to be completely unpredictable.
“He’s trying to get between us, Xander. It’s what he does. He’s done it before. You at least remember that much about him, don’t you?”

Xander still managed to keep his voice even and slow. “No, he’s not doing that.”

“He is and you can’t see it. Now stop defending him and move, Xander.”

Xander met her eyes and stood his ground. “No.”

“I know once he’s gone you’ll see it was the right thing. You need to get out of my way now.”

Spike tensed as Willow’s hair began to move again. Xander looked from her to Spike in confusion, obviously not able to feel the charge prickling through the air. Spike let his face slip and a low growl came from his lips.

“Witch, you need to back off,” he snarled, trying to keep the demon contained for Xander’s sake.

“Xander, move,” Willow said, her eyes fixed on Spike.

“No,” Xander said as he positioned himself directly between her and Spike. “I won’t let you kill Spike.”
“Harris I don’t need you to defend me,” Spike said, worried that in her fury, the witch may well hurt her friend, albeit unintentionally. Or perhaps not.

Willow’s hair whipped around her head and Spike’s skin stung with the energy she was emitting. “Xander.” Her voice was a low warning and as soon as he saw the black flash through her eyes again, Spike moved to push Xander out of harm’s way.

The witch was so on edge she reacted instantly and defensively to Spike’s movement and threw her hands out, pushing out a wave of energy that knocked Xander off his feet and sent him flying heavily into the refrigerator door. There was no time for Spike to check on him.

Willow leapt, hands outstretched and Spike braced himself against the pain that he knew he was about to inflict on himself. Swinging his leather clad arms up at the witch, careful not to touch her with his bare hands, Spike used her forward momentum to push her off balance and send her crashing into the far wall. There was a tinkling of shattered glass as she fell.

He barely registered the burn sparking through his arms and shooting towards his brain as he doubled over, clutching his head and screaming. The stabbing pains
from the chip shot though his skull and he fell to the floor semi-conscious.

Through his blurred vision and the agonising pain he could just make out Xander calling his name and reaching out to him. Spike saw the blood on Xander’s fingers, and heard the witch’s voice crying out in pain and surprise, and knew he needed to get up, to help Xander, but it hurt too much to concentrate—hurt much more than it should have. Blackness overwhelmed him.

Part Thirty-Two

The pain radiated from a point somewhere deep in Spike’s head. More pain than he’d expected. More pain than he’d ever felt before. Maybe if he was lucky he would black out again.

But no. He couldn’t. There was something he needed to do, something urgent, but it hurt too much to remember.

Spike felt the hard floor under him, the cold pressing into his cheek. In small increments, his senses kicked in.
Bright light seeped through his eyelids in agonising slivers. Spike squeezed his eyes closed again and raised a hand to stop the penetrating glare.

He took a deep gasping breath as the jostling movement of his arm triggered more pain in his head. With that breath he scented Xander’s blood—other blood too, not Xander’s, not his own, so he didn’t care.

But Xander was bleeding.

As the ringing in his ears subsided, Spike heard the voices. One loud, shouting; the other pleading, pained.

“Xander, please?”

“Willow you came into my home and attacked my friend, you need to go.”

“But he-.”

“No! No, just leave, I don’t want you here anymore.”

“I’m your friend too.”

“But, you attacked me first.”

“He was going to-.”

“He was protecting me from you! From you, Will. And look at him, look what you’ve done.”
Spike was still curled on the floor, clutching at his head, willing the pain to stop, willing himself up and onto his feet so he could face the witch. The pain was slowly easing, but it still hurt too much to move. His chest ached again too. Spike lay still and listened to Xander’s heart racing, an unsteady tremor in his voice as he attempted to throw his best friend out of his house.

“Xander he threw me into the wall, I’m bleeding and you’re still defending him?”

“It’s a scratch. And I’m defending him because you tried to kill him. What’s happened to you?”

Spike heard her making sounds but no words.

“Oh, god, I can’t believe you really tried to kill him.”

“No, I-.”


“Xan, I’m sorry-.”

“No. Don’t touch me. Get out!”

Touching him? She was touching him? Spike slid his hands under his chest and pushed. Pain flashed through his head, but it was no worse now than a bad headache.
“I’m sorry.” The witch’s voice was further away now.

“No, you’re not.”

There was a door slamming, the snick of a lock and then a thump, and Spike heard Xander’s desperate hitching breaths. Spike had managed to get to his knees, and, reaching for the counter top, pulled himself to his feet.

He held tight to the edge as sparks flew before his eyes and the darkness threatened again. When the pain had subsided to nothing more than a mild ache, Spike opened his eyes and wasted no time in following the sound of Xander’s breaths.

He was crouched on the floor, with his back against the wall and his head cradled in his hands. Xander’s fists were clenched into his hair and Spike could tell from the harsh, ragged sounds that he was battling to calm himself.

There was a thin trickle of blood from a scratch on Xander’s temple, and even though it was nothing life-threatening, Spike’s demon struggled for dominance, to be free to take revenge. Best friend or not, intentional or not, she’d dared to injure Xander. Thoughts of the chip pushed aside, Spike growled low in his throat as he forced himself not to run after the witch and finish her.
At the poorly contained sound, Xander’s head snapped up and his red-rimmed eyes met Spike’s. Xander jumped to his feet and strode across the room, grabbing Spike by the arms.

“You’re okay?” Xander eyes skimmed over him, looking for what, Spike didn’t know. They finally settled on his singed chest.

“Never mind me, you’re bleeding.” Spike’s hand went to Xander’s head and gently touched the wound.

“It’s nothing, it was just a magnet on the fridge door,” Xander said, but let Spike check it anyway. “It’s okay, really.”

“Sorry, I wasn’t fast enough.”

“You’re sorry? My best friend tried to kill you, and you’re sorry?”

“She burned my chest a bit is all. Once I knocked her off it was okay.”

Xander stepped back and Spike could hear his heart pick up pace again. There was a wild desperation in his eyes. “No. No it wasn’t okay. She went for you again Spike, while you were out. You knocked her into the wall and
she fell against a picture, but she got back up aga-.” Xander’s breath caught and his eyes were shining.

“What happened, mate?”

“She-, it took a minute, but she got up and went straight for you.” Xander glanced back to the kitchen and cringed. “I had to pull her off, I had to grab her hands off you and push her away. She was going to kill you.”

“I was only out for a minute.”

“That was all it took. I’ve never seen her like that. She was out of control. There was something wrong with her eyes, and, um, her face. I think-, I don’t know, it was all so fast. I just wanted her gone. Oh shit, Spike,” Xander’s eyes widened and Spike wondered how long human hearts could keep beating that fast. “What if she hasn’t gone, what if she’s just waiting.”

“She had the Bit, she wouldn’t-.” Spike put a hand out, but Xander brushed it aside and raced for the window. He jerked the curtains open and scanned the street.

“Not there, she’s gone.” Xander stepped away from the window, and as he turned, his foot crunched in a small pile of glass. He looked down, but didn’t move his foot. “This is what cut her, she was bleeding. It was only a scratch but she was bleeding and then she jumped on
you again and your chest was-, there was smoke and I could smell it. I grabbed her and pulled and she was screaming at me and-,” He stopped and looked at the floor in the kitchen. “I think I threw her. I think I threw Willow. I know I yelled at her and she stopped.”

“You did what you needed-.”

“That was my Willow. I did it, Spike. I threw her, she landed there,” he waved vaguely towards the corner.

Spike moved across the room and took Xander by the arm, pulling him away from the broken glass. He could smell the tiny drops of the witch’s blood rising from the mess. “She’s not your Willow, mate. She’s lost herself. Found a bit of power and lost herself to that and grief.”

“But I don’t care.” Xander still stared in to the corner of the kitchen. “There was blood on her and I threw her, but I didn’t care. All I cared about was that I could smell you burning.” And finally, Xander tore his eyes away from the kitchen and looked down at Spike’s chest. “She was going to kill you.”

“But she didn’t.”

“But she tried.” Xander’s hand rested over the scorch marks on Spike’s shirt. “I’ve killed demons and vampires
and things I can’t name but that was the worst thing I’ve ever done. She’s my friend and I had to hurt her.”

“She hurt you too, mate. She needed to be stopped. She lost control.”

Xander jerked when the phone rang and his eyes flashed with panic again. He looked at the unit as though it may just bite him. Without taking his hand from Spike’s chest, Xander leaned over and checked the caller ID. “Magic Box. It must be Anya.” He stared at the phone as it kept ringing but made no move to answer it.

Spike watched Xander’s jaw clenching convulsively and scented the fear, anger and sadness rolling off him in thick waves. Xander’s body tensed and the moment the phone stopped ringing; he snatched it up and hurled it into the kitchen. “Leave me alone,” he shouted as it flew through the air.

Spike held up a hand to deflect the pieces as it shattered against the tiled wall and rebounded through the room.

Xander’s chest was heaving and his voice was distressed. “Buffy’s gone. Anya left but won’t stay gone. Willow’s as good as gone. Giles is leaving. How much more can this place totally screw me over?”
“Xander, you need-,” Spike reached out a hand to Xander’s shoulder and almost jumped when he swung around.

“You.” Xander took a step closer, so close Spike could feel his warm breath spilling in rapid bursts, could hear the fear in his shaking voice and racing heart. “This whole time, everything else was going to hell and you were there. Every time I needed someone, you were there. You talked, you listened, you fought with me and for me. While everyone else went about their own business, you were there for me, every damn day.”

“Cause we’re mates.”

“No, we aren’t.” Xander moved even closer and his hand stroked over Spike’s chest.

Spike knew he should step away, knew that Xander was too close, smelled too good, was too warm. But he couldn’t. He didn’t want to. He’d fought the demon over this, fought it for control over denying what he felt. But the demon wouldn’t have a bar of it any longer and Spike was ready to give in, just as Xander was doing.

And while Spike was coming to conclusions, Xander was acting. A warm, wet mouth slammed into his and there was no gentle romance about it. It was hard and
demanding. There were clashing teeth, thrusting tongues and desperate noises.

Xander’s hand pressed into Spike’s chest, curled into his ragged shirt, and- god- it hurt but he didn’t care and didn’t stop it. He couldn’t have now, it was far too late. His demon was howling its pleasure, urging him on and warning him at the same time. Don’t let this go, you need this too.

And easy as that, Spike gave in. He gave in to the demon and its possessive wants; he gave in to the feelings he’d railed against so futilely; he gave in to Xander’s insistent mouth. Even if he had wanted to resist, the demon would not have a bar of it, not now.

Decision made, Spike’s hands shot up and he buried his fingers in Xander’s hair, pulling him even closer, meeting his lips and tongue with equal determination. Both of Xander’s hands were sliding up his back, gripping his shoulders, then his duster was yanked off and Spike heard the heavy leather hit the floor with a thud.

He was engulfed by Xander’s larger, softer body- the warm arms around him, the hot palms running over his back, bunching up his t-shirt. There was the heat from Xander’s chest, flat against his own still-tender skin. The slight undulation as Xander’s hands slid down to Spike’s
hips and pulled them together brought a moan from his lips.

When Xander finally pulled away to breathe, he kept his eyes closed tight, almost as though he were afraid to see Spike’s face staring back at him. Through his panting, Xander’s voice was ragged and breathless.

“Please don’t say no. Please.”

Spike gave a soft snort and his arms wrapped around Xander’s neck pulling him in to another kiss that was less aggressive, but just as urgent.

Xander groaned into Spike’s mouth and Spike wondered why he’d ever thought this would be a bad idea. The soft, wet heat of Xander’s mouth, the taste of him, the feel of his hands, now roaming under Spike’s shirt and up his spine- all burned a course straight to his groin, and he was hard.

Spike pressed his hips forward into Xander and was met with a hard nudge back. Tearing his mouth away, he reached out and pulled Xander’s shirt up and off, lifting his arms as Xander did the same with the ruins of Spike’s black t-shirt.

His chest still hurt but it was easing, and there was no way Spike could resist pressing himself into the soft,
broad expanse of Xander’s chest. The hairs tickled and the soft skin moulded itself to him leaving no space, nothing between them.

It was clumsy and awkward, but Spike manoeuvred Xander to the sofa and they both fell, teeth jabbing into lips at the impact with the cushions. The sofa wasn’t long enough- not nearly long enough- but Spike didn’t care.

His demon pushed at him to bite, to taste and take despite the chip, but Spike still had the small amount of control he needed to keep it at bay. He had no idea where that control came from.

There was gasping, panting, grunting. Someone’s hand- or maybe both their hands together had slid between them, fumbling with buttons and zips and belts. Jeans were pushed down roughly to knees and then there was nothing but flesh, hot hard flesh.

There was no art to it, no time taken to explore or tease. As their kisses had been, it was fast and needy. Xander’s large, hot hands grabbed at Spike, grinding them both together.

Spike thrust against him, swivelling his hips and when he heard Xander’s breath begin to falter, he opened his eyes.
Glittering brown stared back at him for an instant, and then Xander’s eyes squeezed shut. Spike heard the soft grunts as Xander’s whole body tensed and then shook.

Spike’s forehead was pressed to Xander’s and his fingers sunk into the flesh of Xander’s hips as he gripped him convulsively. A few more slippery thrusts, and Spike was coming too, collapsing against Xander with a long satisfied groan.

Xander was still breathing hard; Spike could taste his hot breath and hear the heart gradually slowing.

He wanted to say something, but what?

It had been such a simple act- so sudden and over so quickly. In other circumstances, Spike might have felt some embarrassment at the lack of finesse, but it had been fast for Xander too and he knew that it was just a result of both of them finally giving in to what they’d denied themselves.

Even so, he had no idea how Xander was going to react. However that turned out though, Spike knew he’d just set himself a new course. No changing tack now. The demon would not allow it and Spike knew without a doubt this was what he wanted.
He dropped his forehead to Xander’s shoulder and lay still listening to the slowing breaths from the man beneath him, while a pair of warm hands slid softly onto the small of his back.

Part Thirty-Three

Spike woke at a sudden twitch from Xander. He had no idea how long they’d been sleeping, but judging by the slow, deep breathing beneath him, and the crick in his own neck, it had been a long while.

One of Xander’s hands had slipped off Spike’s back and was hanging off the sofa. The other was still a pleasant weight around his waist. The penetrating heat of Xander’s body, his hand, his breath had spread through him. Spike had been cold for so long.

The briefest of thoughts crossed his mind. Should he get up? Should he disappear before Xander woke? The rage from his demon lasted only as long as the thought of leaving.
Trying not to disturb Xander, Spike lifted his head and twisted around looking for the time. Just an hour until dawn. Were they at that place where Spike could assume he would be welcome to stay and sleep away the daylight? He had no idea, but maybe after the stresses of the night before, it would be best not to push too hard just now.

“Spike?” Xander said, with a sleep-filled croak in his voice.

“Sorry, I woke you. I was looking for a clock. It’s nearly dawn.”

“Oh.” Xander began to push himself upright and Spike lifted himself off, pulling his jeans on as he backed away from the sofa. He turned away as Xander dressed himself and then stood awkwardly shifting from foot to foot.

“So, you’re leaving then?” “I should head off.” They spoke together and Xander cracked a small smile.

Spike sighed. “Might be best. Sun’s not far off, and I imagine you’ve got some things to do today, people to see.”

“Willow?” Xander said with a hint of uncertainty. “I’m not-.”
“No, mate. I meant the watcher, leaving on a jet plane isn’t he?”

“Oh, right. Yeah he is.”

“I’d come with you, just to see the old bugger actually leave, but, well-.” Spike shrugged and held his hands out wide.

“Combustible, yeah I get it. I don’t think Giles will be too heart broken over it. I don’t think he even wants me there, but I’ll drive him to LA anyhow”

He was probably right, the watcher wouldn’t want a scene. Spike just nodded and the conversation died as they both just stood, looking anywhere but at each other.

Maybe it had been a mistake after all. Should it be this difficult to face each other if it was what they both really wanted? Spike was just about to turn and leave when a small movement caught his eye.

Spike’s eyes were drawn to the motion of Xander’s long thick fingers running through the dark hairs below his navel, the soft skin rippling as he scratched absently at his belly.
The corners of Spike’s mouth turned up in a smile as he remembered how it felt lying against that warm, soft belly. How it felt as they gave in.

Xander cleared his throat, and his hands dropped to his sides as he tentatively asked, “So, are we okay here?”

Here was an opportunity to end it, to admit to weakness and possible mistakes. To blame the intensity of the confrontation with the witch. To go back to just friends and not complicate either of their lives.

Spike knew he could easily do that. Pick up his shirt and coat and be gone before Xander could even blink. Save them both the hurt he still had no doubt would come eventually.

Instead, much to his demon’s satisfaction, he took a step forward, pressed himself against the warm stomach, slid a hand up Xander’s back and kissed him.

He could feel the tension and worry leaving Xander, and the last of the resistance fading in himself. He pulled away and smiled. “Yeah, mate, we’re okay.”

Xander gave a nervous laugh and stepped away to grab his shirt. “Good, that’s good, ‘cause, you know, with the morning after, and the second thoughts and the what the
hell have I done, it could have gotten ugly, but it didn’t so, yay!”

Spike found his t-shirt on the floor and picked it up. “No second thoughts here, but remember I warned you. You know what you’re getting into, yeah?”

Xander rolled his eyes. “Yeah, and so do you. I make a mess in the bathroom and I snore and hog the blankets.” He froze. “Oh. Not that I’m assuming that we’ll be-, that you know, you and I will, um, that there’ll be sharing of the bed, because I just-.”

Spike smirked and leaned in to take a deep breath at Xander’s neck, following it with a nip at his ear. “You can make all the assumptions you like, Harris,” he whispered into Xander’s ear. “In fact, I’m leaving now, and you can just assume away all day, then tonight, you come and find me and tell me all about your assumptions, right? Course, most people call them fantasies, but whatever gets you through the day.”

He stepped back to pull on the shirt and looked down when he saw the colour drain from Xander’s face. There was a distinct hole in the front of Spike shirt. The burn on his chest had healed to nothing more than a faint pinkish mark, barely noticeable, and in the afterglow with Xander he’d almost forgotten what had happened.
“Spike, what if she comes after you?”

“Don’t you worry about me, I can take care of myself.”

“Against her and her magic? With your chip?”

Spike took him by the shoulders. “Listen, mate. I think things got away from her last night. She overreacted when she knew she’d been found out. She’s had a night to think it over, and all her bloodmindedness aside, I think she’ll have scared herself. She hurt you. That might have been enough to make her stop and consider her next move.”

“I haven’t seen her like that before, did you see her eyes and the lines on her face? What was wrong with her face?”

“Magic. I’d say Red’s gotten into some of Rupert’s heavier reading and she’s powered herself up a bit more than she can handle. I’ve noticed she can’t control it when she’s emotional. The magic gets away from her.”

“Spike, if she’s done that, then how do we stop her? We had no chance when she was just plain Willow, but now she’s gone and upped the ante, what do we do?”
Spike sighed. “No idea right now, mate. Let’s just get a bit of distance from last night and see what comes up, yeah?”

“I don’t know what to do if I see her today. What if she wants to come when I take Giles to the airport? Or if she’s there when I go pick up Dawn?”

“I doubt she will be, I think she’ll keep a low profile for a bit. But even if she is, she’s not going to do anything with the Bit around, is she?”

“No, true.” Xander sighed and ran his hands through his hair. “I’m sorry, I’m probably worrying for nothing, it’s just been such a weird night. Oh. Um.” Xander turned and waved a hand at the sofa. “Not that I meant that was weird, cause that was, it was-. Good. It was good, wasn’t it?”

Spike smiled. “Yeah, mate, it was.”

A red flush crept up Xander’s cheeks. “You’re probably disappointed. It wasn’t very-.”

“Oi, Harris!” Spike gave his shoulder a gentle shove. “I said it was good. Have I lied to you recently?”

“No. But I thought-. “
Spike found his duster and swung it on, checking the pockets for his cigarettes. “Yeah, well stop thinking like that. It was no bloody marathon, but it did the job didn’t it? We’ve been trying to ignore this thing, and it was exactly what we both needed.”

Xander gave a half-hearted nod. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Right then. I’m off. You go and get rid of the watcher then come by mine tonight and we’ll sort out this witch problem, yeah?”

“Oh, you just want to talk about Willow, right. Okay, sure, we can do that.” Xander headed for the front door and unlocked it, holding it open for Spike and looking supremely uncomfortable.

Spike shook his head and sighed. It seemed that no matter what he said, what assurances he gave, Xander was going to be thinking he was a let down, maybe even a one night stand. Typical.

On his way through the door, Spike stopped, turned and pushed Xander back against the wall. He crowded in and pressed up against Xander, one hand twisted in his hair, pulling him into a heated kiss, the other slipped into the back pocket of Xander’s jeans and squeezed.
Spike let him go and gave a lop-sided smirk at the flushed and rumpled, but obviously pleased Xander. “I don’t just want to talk about the witch. See you later, mate.” He turned, flaring his coat, and strode off down the corridor, smiling to himself with satisfaction.

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Late afternoon, after a good long sleep, a half bottle of Jack and a spot of impatient pacing, Spike was standing in his doorway, smoking. Another small consideration for Xander- smoking outside even though the man wasn’t there.

Time was, if someone had told Spike he would be standing here, waiting for Xander Harris, thinking about him, wanting him, he would have laughed in their face; then he may have considered killing them just so they couldn’t tell him again.

But time, distance and a new friendship, put paid to old antagonisms and Spike found it very difficult to dredge up the old feelings of enmity. How had it happened? How had he come to feel for the awkward, clumsy, far-too-young and fragile human?

It didn’t really matter, but the fact was he did, Xander felt the same and now they had acted on it. Despite their
better judgement and plans to the contrary, they had given in to their feelings. Spike found he had no regrets. But neither did he regret holding off, trying to avoid this happening.

He still felt it there would be significant issues down the track- that was if they even made it any further than this. But he supposed they would deal with whatever came up as it came up. Neither of them were going in blind, both were adults, even if one of them was definitely old enough to know better.

It was a quiet evening, and in the distance, Spike heard the familiar sound of Xander’s car pulling up to the gates. He was surprised at the lurch he felt in his gut and the almost-warmth spreading through him at the thought of Xander arriving. Bloody sappy git.

Spike tried to push aside the urges from his demon to go out and protect Xander, to make absolutely sure that he wasn’t touched. It was still too bloody sunny. But then, couldn’t he make it if he kept to the shadows? Stuck to the cover of trees?

He ignored the compulsion to throw his coat over his head and risk it. Instead, knowing Xander wouldn’t appreciate him hovering, he lit another cigarette, leaned
against the doorframe, watched and waited, with more longing than he’d expected.

It was only minutes until he heard the footsteps, then seconds till he saw Harris. Xander emerged from the shadowed path, caught sight of Spike and an enormous grin, both shy and promising, spread across his face.

He watched Xander approaching, took in the long sure stride, the strong solid build, the dark hair, just getting a little shaggy. Shaggy. Shag. Shagging Harris. Spike snorted to himself. Yeah, a century plus of maturity was very obvious in those thoughts.

Spike felt himself responding with a warm smile and wondered how his heart would sound now, if it could beat. He didn’t care a whit that he might be looking just like the sappy git he’d earlier pegged himself as. He sighed with resigned acceptance. All over Xander Harris.

Forget the past, forget the clashes and death threats and disparaging insults. This was now, this was a different Spike, a different Harris. They’d started the summer as indifferent acquaintances, maybe enemies. Now, thanks to a shared grief, they were what? Friends? More than? Labels could wait for later. Xander was here now.
Spike flicked the cigarette butt away and stood up straighter as Xander neared. He stopped just in front of the door and looked up at Spike, suddenly all the confidence Spike had seen in Xander’s face drained away and he stared with uncertainty and awkwardness.

“Um, hi.”

“Harris.” Spike nodded, still smiling. “Good to see you.”

“Is it? Oh, I mean, yeah, it is, um, it’s good to see you too.” Xander stuffed his hands in his back pockets, but then just as quickly, folded them under his arms.

Spike could hear Xander’s heart picking up pace, and could easily sense the fear. His smile faltered for a moment, and he frowned, putting a cool hand on Xander’s shoulder, squeezing gently. “Something wrong, mate? You had a change of heart have you?”

Xander’s eyes widened and he shook his head. “No! No, I haven’t.”

“Neither have I.” Spike laughed. “Couldn’t even if I wanted to. The soddin’ demon wouldn’t let me rest if I backed out now.”

“Oh. The demon wouldn’t let you.”
Spike sighed. “Point is, I haven’t changed my mind and you haven’t changed yours, so what are we still doing standing around out here then, eh?”

Spike lifted his hand from Xander’s shoulder and brushed it over the stubbly cheek.

Xander smiled. “No idea,” he said as he stepped in and kissed Spike.

Yeah, this was right. Big hands and heavy arms wrapping themselves around him, as Spike pulled Xander into the dark crypt. Small noises of satisfaction as their kiss grew more frantic.

The heavy door slammed behind them, Spike pushed Xander back against it and the desperate hands tugging at his clothes told him they were okay. As Xander’s jeans dropped to the floor and Spike followed, cracking his knees against the stone, he knew there would be no turning back.

Inside him, Spike’s demon growled its possessive agreement.

Part Thirty-Four

Spike rolled over and reached out for Xander, but found only cold sheets and an empty bed. There was a twinge
of pain when he sat up, but it only brought a smile to his face as he recalled the reason. He leaned down into the empty space and inhaled the scent still lingering on the sheets and pillow.

Despite best intentions, no planning and scheming and had been done last night. None. Thoughts of the witch and the absent watcher were far from their minds, as they made up for the hurried and, to Spike’s mind, less than impressive performance in Xander’s apartment. A man- living or otherwise- could not let that stand for too long.

It hadn’t taken long for them to work out the limits of Spike’s chip, and with Xander being so new to the game and a little unsure anyway, it had worked out well all round. Xander had been more than happy to take charge, as it were, and Spike was confident a bag or two of blood this morning would soon put an end to the painful twinges.

For just a moment, a still sleep-dazed Spike wondered if Xander had run off- gotten spooked maybe. Sunrise had been and gone a couple of hours ago, and the other side of his bed was completely cold.

A muffled laugh from upstairs caught Spike’s attention, and, once the fog in his head cleared, he could hear the
low sounds of the television. A warm feeling, suspiciously like contentment, spread through him as Spike hauled himself out of bed, pulled on his jeans and climbed the ladder.

Xander’s head whipped around, a wary smile on his face as Spike emerged. “Sorry if I woke you up. Nature called, so I went outside, and then I got distracted cause we kinda left the TV on, and I had to get up for work anyway, so I figured, you know, why not just-, hey!”

Spike smirked at the nervous flow of words, yanked on the mechanism that tipped Xander’s chair back and leaned over the seat, stopping his flow of words with a sound kiss.

“Morning,” he said, righting the chair again, but then Xander’s words sank in and he froze, the smile disappearing from his face as the demon pushed for control. “You went outside? Out in the cemetery?”

Xander frowned. “Um, well yeah. I had to- you know- go. And you don’t have any plumbing so I-.”

Spike held a hand up and shook his head. “You went outside, by yourself?”
“Spike I can do these things by myself, I have been for a long time now.” He flicked the waistband of his jeans. “See? No pampers.”

“You don’t do that, yeah? Anything could have happened.” Spike pushed the chair upright, crouched down in front of Xander and took him by the shoulders. “You tell me if you need to go out there. Bloody hell, Harris, anything could have happened.”

Xander pulled away and stared at Spike with confusion. “What are you talking about? Number one, its daylight. Secondly, how old am I? And three, what the hell?”

More than the facial expression, it was Xander pulling away from him that made Spike stop and think. What the hell was he doing? It was this kind of thing that had got between them last week.

Spike closed his eyes and concentrated on pushing the edgy demon aside. “Sorry, mate. You’re right. Daylight, yeah? Must have forgot. Not a lot of blood left in my brain this morning, you might say.” He gave what he hoped was a leer, but judging by Xander’s sceptical look, he feared it ended up looking somewhat less than that.

Xander stared at him a minute longer, then smiled and Spike relaxed. “Yeah, I know the feeling. Wasn’t sure I
would make it back upstairs on these legs.” Xander pushed himself out of the chair. “But make it I did, and leave for work I must.”

“We’ll sort out what to do about the witch tonight, then?” Spike asked, then a thought occurred to him, something about Xander’s mood he’d noticed last night, but been rather too distracted to bring up at the time. “And you can tell me what happened on the trip to the airport yesterday that got under your skin.”

“On the who what now?” Xander blushed and turned away to grab his coat.

“You, trip, airport.”

“Um, nothing happened, I took Giles, we did a stoic British farewell and we came back.”

Spike said nothing, merely stared at Xander, one eyebrow raised.

“What?”

“Harris, I know when something’s up with you. And yesterday something was up.” Xander snorteded and grinned and Spike rolled his eyes. It was good that they seemed to be past the awkward and unsure stage. “That’s not what I meant.”
“I know, but I couldn’t just leave that there.” He sighed. “Yeah okay, something happened and I’ll tell you tonight. It’s really no big deal.”

“So, pub then? You’ll come by here after work, yeah?”

“It’s a date,” Xander said with a grin, snatching up his cars keys.

Spike followed him to the door where there was a pleasantly long and slow goodbye that he could well get used to. As he watched Xander leave and vanish down the tree lined path, the demon again twitched its displeasure at being unable to follow and protect.

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Spike tried waiting. He slept some more, watched television, and in the end realised that he would need to get out and stop lurking around his own home. He knew damn well that Xander wouldn’t be back until after dark, yet here he was, bordering on mooning like a teenage girl, fidgeting around and waiting.

Not a pretty sight; and Spike was doubly glad for the lack of mirrors and reflection that would have pointed out quite clearly that he was in danger of becoming a sap.
Swearing at himself and at his demon, who was far too possessive and demanding for his liking, Spike grabbed his smokes and flask, threw his coat over his head and made a dash for the nearest sewer access.

It was a familiar trip through the tunnels, one which brought him out at an access point near Xander’s work site, while he waited for the sun to go down enough to be safe above ground.

After another short wait, he emerged from the tunnels as soon as the street was dim enough and made the short walk to Xander’s site. At this time of day, the gates were still open and most labourers had left, leaving only a handful of cars in the parking lot. Xander’s sat in the middle of the row.

Spike slipped in through the gates. Now he was there, he wasn’t sure exactly what he was doing. Was he going to the office to meet Xander? Was he going to wait in the parking lot for him to come out? Would he wait and watch and then run back through the sewers to beat Xander to the crypt?

He lit a cigarette and took up a position on a stack of wooden palettes while he considered whether he and Xander were at the point where he could walk in to the office and collect him. Spike laughed. Not bloody likely.
And what the hell was he doing thinking like this again, anyway?

It was this inner urge to make sure that Xander was safe, that nothing would get to him between walking from the office to getting in the car. Such a strong urge—fucking demon!

Spike launched himself back to his feet, kicking out at an empty paint can and anything else lying close by. This was why he’d wanted to avoid getting into anything with Xander. The demon was tightening its hold on his strings. Spike had become complacent and that was all it needed to begin influencing his moods, his thoughts.

One swift swing of his boot, and a bottle smashed satisfyingly against a fence post.

There was no question of ending this thing with Xander. Not now. Fallout from the demon aside, Spike just couldn’t imagine letting him go now. They were friends, had been for a long time, though they were definitely something more now. There was not a chance that Spike could add to his hurt by backing out.

Right, then. Spike stopped searching for things to kick, closed his eyes and focused his thoughts inwards. There was a definite pull there from his demon, a still-growing
possessive feeling towards Xander, a base need to protect, even stronger now that they had been together. As far as the demon was concerned, Xander was his and should not be out of his sight.

Spike hadn’t felt this disjointed and out of control for a long while. A good spot of mindless violence might well be enough to regain his self control but he was going to have to fight harder for it this time.

Rethinking his decision to come to the site, Spike had turned to leave when he heard Xander’s voice coming from the office doorway.

“It’s not right for you to be here,” Xander was saying.

“Five minutes, Xander. I only want five minutes.”

The demon bint!

Spike turned back, but the office doorway was obscured by the side of another building and there was nowhere closer Spike could conceal himself and see what was going on. Instead, he moved back behind the stack of palettes and just listened. Xander’s voice wasn’t raised, but Spike could hear the stress and anger building.

“Not now. You need to go.”
“Xan, please. We need to talk.”

“I don’t have anything to say to you. Now I’m at work, you have to-.”

“Fine, if you won’t talk to me now, I’ll come to the apartment later.” Spike almost laughed aloud at the flounce he could hear in her voice and imagined her with hands on her hips, tossing her hair.

“Do that. But I won’t be there.”

“Why not? Where will you be?” There was a demanding edge to her tone now and Spike wondered if Xander would stand up to her.

“Anya, you left. We broke up. You don’t get to ask me things like that anymore.” Yes he would. Good man. Spike smirked and pictured her face.

“Well, maybe I want to fix that.” He didn’t need to see the woman to know exactly the expression now; the low flirting tone in her voice was enough. He clenched his fists inside his coat pockets.

“You can’t. I don’t want to.”

“But you haven’t even heard my proposal!”
“What proposal?” Spike heard the anger only just contained in Xander’s voice. “Any, there’s nothing here anymore. We’re done. I told you as much yesterday.”

Yesterday? So this is what Spike had picked up on? And the stupid woman was back at him again. What he wouldn’t give to be able to deal with the woman his own way. But this was not for him. This was Xander’s issue, and no matter how much Spike hated her and no matter how much she bothered Xander, he knew he wouldn’t win any points by disembowelling the ex.

Spike’s fingernails dug deep into his palms and he could feel a cool trickle of blood running over his fingers.

“But you haven’t heard-.”

“I don’t need to. We’re done, Anya.”

Spike chanced a look around the edge of the palettes and saw that Xander was leading her back to the parking lot.

“You know, Willow was right. You’ve changed.” The woman was digging around in her bag and Spike heard the faint jingle of car keys.

“Yeah, we all have. It hasn’t been an easy year.”
“Well maybe if you’d spent more time with your friends than with Spike-.”

Spike heard Xander’s sigh and the disgusted tone in his voice as he turned away from her and strode back towards the building. “Goodbye, Anya.”

When he heard Xander’s footsteps reach the building, Spike quickly ducked around the palettes as Anya left via the nearby gate.

Bloody woman, she wasn’t going to let him be. Always was persistent that one. Spike lit a cigarette and wandered over to Xander’s car, perching himself on the bonnet.

It wasn’t long before he heard the sounds of the building being locked up, and Xander emerged, laughing and talking with a group of men. Spike swore as he again felt that surge of possessiveness inside. It lasted for as long as it took Xander to look up and see Spike sitting on his car.

Then the warm, happy smile that lit his face and the quick goodbye for his colleagues as Xander jogged across the lot was enough to pacify both Spike and the demon.
Part Thirty-Five

Spike decided not to share the fact that he’d overheard Xander’s conversation. Not that he was trying to catch him out, more that he wasn’t sure how Xander would take to him hanging about the site. Spike snorted. Hanging about. *Lurking* more like.

He watched Xander hurrying to the car and smiled appreciatively. Easy on the eyes, he was. A good solid build, nice wide shoulders, thick neck, broad chest and just a little soft around the middle. Strong, healthy- well, as healthy as he could be given the rubbish he ate - but still. Spike nodded. Nice, that.

Spike’s gaze raked over him once more as Xander arrived at the car, slightly out of breath, but still smiling ear to ear. He slid off the bonnet and shook his head as he pulled his coat across his front, he’d have to watch his thoughts more closely when they were out.

“Spike, hi!” Xander’s eyes flicked to the gates and his smile faltered just a little. “Ah, how long you been here?”

“Minute or two, not long at all.”
“Oh.” A brief look of doubt crossed his face, then was gone. “Okay, well, you want to go get a beer? I’m pretty hungry too, I could eat,” Xander said, looking at him hopefully.

“Beer and food it is then.” Spike confirmed as they climbed in the car. “Course, once you’re watered and fed, you have a bit of a story to tell don’t you?”

Xander groaned. “Oh, great, you remembered.”

“Not going to forget something like that, am I?”

“I wish you would,” Xander said, as he steered the car out onto the road. “There’s not really much to tell.”

“Tell me then, and I might agree with you.”

“You’re a hard man.”

*Man?* Wasn’t often he was called that. Spike suppressed the pleased smile.

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As they’d gotten closer to the bar, Xander had become nervous, trying to cover it with conversation and quips. Inside, Spike found their usual table, while Xander ordered his food and their drinks.
Did he perhaps not realise how well Spike could read him? The faint chemical traces, the heart beat and the merest change to the inflections in his speech. It had taken months of time together, but Spike was fairly confident he was right. Xander was anxious about whatever had been happening.

“Nuts?” Xander said, sliding a bowl across the table as he sat down with their drinks and a meal on a tray.

“Yeah, mate, you could well be,” Spike said, trying to lighten his mood.

“Huh?” Xander’s face scrunched up in confusion.

“Never mind. Eat your food, yeah?”

Spike fiddled with the peanuts, dropping shells on the floor and occasionally stealing food from Xander’s plate as he ate.

“You know, Spike, you could get your own food.”

“Not hungry. I had a couple of bags before I left,” Spike said as he took another handful of onion rings.

Xander nodded slowly as he ate, keeping an eye on both Spike and his food. “So. What were you doing in the
parking lot? I thought I was going to meet you at the crypt.”

“Right, you were. I thought I’d save you the drive. Fancied getting out for a bit of a run.”

“We can patrol. If you need to get out, have a fight or two, we can go tonight. You want to-.”

Spike shook his head. “No, not tonight. We got things here need dealing with. We can patrol tomorrow.”

Xander patrolling? In the dark, with demons and vampires and hell knew what else? The demon didn’t like that idea any more than Spike himself did. He stifled the growl and forced a smile. Wouldn’t do for Xander to pick up on that. Not after all their months of patrol and training of a sort, and Spike knew he couldn’t put an end to it. Xander looked forward to it as much as he did. But the thought of Xander on the line, in harm’s way did not sit well at all anymore.

Xander sighed, pushed his plate away and sat back in his seat, looking for all the world like a man on his way into the dentist’s office. “It’s really nothing. Really. You’re gonna be so disappointed when you hear it, it’s almost not even worth it anymore. Let’s go patrol.” Xander half heartedly pushed his chair back and made to stand.
Spike grabbed his wrist and pulled him back down. “Nice try there, Harris. Something happened yesterday, and, if I’m right-,” and Spike knew he was exactly right, “something happened today too. Now out with it.” He let go of Xander’s arm and gave his hand a quick squeeze.

“Yeah. Okay. Yesterday.” Xander leaned forward and rested his arms on the table. “I went to collect Dawn, she wanted to come to the airport. When I got there, Anya was there too.”

“But you would have been there bloody early. Long drive to the airport isn’t it?”

“Yeah it was early. Willow wasn’t up yet, she said her goodbyes yesterday. Anyway, Anya insisted on coming too, she was waiting with Dawnie at the door. Actually, she was trying to get Dawn to stay behind, saying it was too emotional for her, she’d had a late night, Giles wouldn’t want her there- I don’t know, she just had a string of stupid excuses.” Xander stopped and sipped at his drink shaking his head. “I just took Dawn’s hand and dragged her off to the car. I couldn’t tell Anya not to come; there was plenty of room in the car.”

Spike snorted. “You bloody well could have told her, you know. Goes something like this- No you dozy cow, I don’t want your interfering arse in my car.” At Xander’s
doubtful look, Spike sighed. “Maybe that’s more my style than yours, yeah?”

“Yeah. So Anya jumped in the front seat and all the way to Giles’ she just talked and talked like nothing had changed. She talked about decorating the apartment and about places we used to go eat- I guess it was like we’d never split up. It felt wrong, you know?”

Spike worked hard to contain his agitation. Damn that woman! What would it take to make her back off? It wasn’t like Spike could very well go and declare him off-limits. Xander was getting a hard enough time of things now, with everyone thinking they were friends. If the women found out there was more to it- well, they just wouldn’t. Not unless Xander wanted it.

“Spike? Are you okay?”

Spike took a deep breath to calm himself and nodded. “Yeah, why?”

“Oh, I just thought I saw-.” Xander waved a hand at his face. “Never mind. It must be the lights flicking. So yeah, we picked up Giles and I managed to get Anya in the back seat with Dawn. She wasn’t too happy, but I wasn’t going to let Giles ride back there and have to talk to her all the way to LA. So, she was pretty quiet; we all were.”
“Yeah, I bet the Niblet wasn’t too happy with him leaving.” Spike frowned. “She okay now? Do we need to do something with her?”

Xander smiled at him. “I think she’s alright. No matter what else is going on, Willow and Tara will look out for her. Anya too, I suppose.”

“Still, a night out at our place might cheer her up.”

Xander’s head snapped up and he raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“What?” Spike asked.

“Our place?”

Spike thought back over his words. Damn. He rolled his eyes, trying to cover his awkwardness at the gaff. “You know what I meant.”

Xander rested his chin in his hands, elbows on the table and smiled. “Nope. Enlighten me, why don’t you?”

“You, Harris, are a bloody smart arse,” he said. “Look, I meant your place or my place as opposed to her own place, yeah?”

“Yeah, I know, I just wanted to see you squirm,” Xander said, laughing, and Spike felt warmth spread through him
at the shining brown eyes and happy smile directed solely at him.

“I do not bloody squirm, you silly git.”

Xander slapped the table. “Points for me as the vampire resorts to third grade insults.”

Spike joined his laughter, glad for a break in the tension. Still, he wondered if that had been all that bothered Xander yesterday and knew he wouldn’t be satisfied until he had the whole story. “So, your ex tagged along and made a nuisance of herself then. That it?”

The smile slowly faded from Xander’s face and he shrugged. “Mostly. We got to the airport and saw Giles off, then when Dawn was in the bathroom, Anya tried to-

Spike reached across the table and grabbed Xander’s arm. “Did she touch you again? What did she do?”

Xander appeared startled for a moment, but then gently took Spike’s hand, held it for a moment then dropped it back on Spike’s side of the table. “No, she just wanted to talk about us. Wanted to know would I reconsider it and give her another shot.”
“Right.” Spike was seething. He’d known she was after Xander again, it was obvious to anyone with a functioning brain.

“Spike, it’s okay, I told her no, and I’m not interested.” Xander ran his hands through his hair. “I don’t understand why she keeps trying. I don’t want to tell her about us, but if she keeps this up, it might be the only thing to get rid of her for good.”

“If you don’t want to tell her, then you don’t. You just stick to your guns and she’ll have to get it eventually won’t she?”

“This is Anya. It might be the only way to get the message across- short of her actually walking in on us, and even then it’s not a hundred percent.”

Spike deliberately worked to keep his thoughts of violence from showing. It took considerable effort and the remainder of his whiskey but he kept it together and was able to calmly signal Xander to continue.

“So, yeah. She didn’t talk much on the way back, but Giles had just left so Dawn and I weren’t really up for a big conversation. I let them out back at the house and after Dawn went in, Anya asked me again to think about it, tried to hug me and I-.”
He had tried. He’d concentrated, focused, and still the low growl slipped by Spike’s control. “She can’t be doing that. Not when you don’t want her to.”

“Spike, come on. You can’t lose it in here, okay? She didn’t touch me, I said she tried. I pushed her off me, told her that was the last time I wanted to hear anything about us, we were over and that’s the end of it. I got in the car and came to your place.”

Spike nodded. He clenched his teeth, took a long slow breath and stood up, indicating Xander should follow him. He held himself in check long enough to get out the door and across the street to the car before he let fly. “What the bleeding hell is wrong with that stupid fucking woman? No means no for them, but from us it means nothing? And then she does it again today? What the-.”

He realised his mistake as soon as the words left his mouth.

“How do you know she did it again today?” Xander asked, folding his arms over his chest. “I never said anything about that.”

“So she did?”

“Well, yeah, she did, but that is so not the point.”
“Yeah, I suppose not then. Right, so, you looked upset or worried or something so-.”

“Spike, when did you stop being able to lie to me?” Xander asked softly.

“Excuse me?” Spike said, surprised at the note of sadness in Xander’s voice.

“You’re lying to me. Right now, you’re lying to me. Or no, I should say you’re lying again. Because this isn’t the first time tonight.” Spike opened his mouth to protest but Xander held a hand up and continued. “You lied to me at the site when you said you had only been there a minute; you lied to me inside when you said we can patrol tomorrow, and you lied just now.”

Spike stared incredulously at him, but Xander had that no nonsense look he got, and Spike knew there would be no getting around him. He slouched against the side of Xander’s car. “Bloody hell.”

“So give. What the hell are you playing at? We’ve been friends a long time now, more than friends for a bit of that too. I know when you’re lying to me, I might have overlooked a few white lies, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t noticed. And these ones? Not so much with the white.”
Here he’d been, so pleased with himself for thinking he could read Xander like a book courtesy of his enhanced senses. Did he stop to think Xander might have picked up a few of *his* tells along the way? Oh, no. That thought had never occurred to him.

Spike took a deep breath. “Look, I was there at the site when the demon bint was talking to you. I wasn’t spying or anything like that, I just got sick of waiting for you at home, yeah? I didn’t want you to think I was a soddin’ stalker, so I stayed out of the way till she was gone.”

“You hid and listened because you didn’t want me to think you were a spying stalker?” Xander shook his head. “Okay, that must be some kind of crazy vampire logic. So, patrol tomorrow? Why’d you lie about that?”

Spike couldn’t help the horrified look that passed over his face, and knew that Xander had seen it. “Look, Harris, can we just get this business with your ex out of the way?”

“If you were at the site, then there’s nothing else I need to tell you.” Xander’s eyes narrowed and he pulled his keys out as he made a move towards the back of the car. “Let’s just grab some weapons and we can do a quick circuit of the park on the next block.”
“No-,” Spike bit off the words of protest but not soon enough.

“Okay, Spike, what the hell is going on?” Xander shoved the keys back in his pocket and sat on the trunk. “You don’t want me to patrol anymore do you? You don’t like when I say Anya’s tried to touch me- I don’t like that either, you know? Is this what you warned me about? Is this why you didn’t want us to follow through on this thing between us? Because you’re protective and jealous?”

Why couldn’t Xander have stayed the clueless self centred boy he used to be? Spike sighed and shook his head. “Yeah, that’s what I meant. But this is just the tip of the iceberg, mate

Part Thirty-Six

Except for the noise and light coming from the bar they’d just left, the street was dark and quiet, which suited
Spike fine. He didn’t think this was going to be the kind of conversation Xander would want an audience for.

“Spike you can’t wrap me up in cotton wool and protect me from everything. I don’t want that.”

Spike leaned back on the car next to Xander. “Yeah, I know you don’t. And I don’t want to do that. But I can’t help what the bloody demon wants. I told you about this, you knew.”

“You and the demon are one and the same; can’t you- I don’t know- squash it or something?”

Spike glanced at Xander over his shoulder and rolled his eyes. “Easier said than done. Especially now it’s got a bit of a toehold.”

“How so?”

“The blow up with the witch, this thing with us, it’s got me a bit on edge and the demon takes advantage of the distraction and next thing you know, I’m wanting to dismember the guy who looks in your general direction.”

Xander snorted softly and pushed Spike with his knee. “Or the ex demon who doesn’t know when to quit and makes you jealous?”
Spike nodded. “That too.”

Xander sighed and stared at him for a long while. “You were there for the whole Willow thing; you know I’m not siding with her so she probably won’t be able to get this spell off the ground. And, if you heard Anya today, then you heard me too. I don’t want anything to do with her.” Xander slid off the car and stood face to face with Spike, so close that Spike could feel the warmth of Xander’s breath on his face. “There’s nothing to be jealous of, you know. She’s not the one I’m going home with tonight.”

“Bloody hell, Harris. You are either very thick or very brave,” Spike said, shaking his head as he detected an increase in Xander’s heart rate. “Not sure which, but I’m leaning towards thick.”

Xander laughed, took a step closer and laid his hand on Spike’s hip. Spike’s eyes closed as the warm fingers slid up his back and drew him in while Xander’s words tickled over his ear. “Why? Because I know what I’m getting into and I still decide that it’s worth the risk?”

“That’s exactly why.” Spike turned his head and let his lips brush against Xander’s face. “Now didn’t you say something about going home with me tonight?”
Xander’s hand slid down Spike’s back and rested just under the waistband of his jeans. His head turned and he briefly met Spike’s lips with his own. Spike was conscious of where they were and took a moment to appreciate Xander’s surprising forwardness. Just a moment, though, because Xander’s lips were grazing over his jaw and his hands were slipping further down Spike’s arse. “My place, okay?”

“Mine’s closer.”

“My,” Xander insisted. “For two good reasons.”

“What’re those?” Spike asked doubtfully.

“Plumbing and cable.”

Spike laughed softly and pushed Xander away towards the car door. “You win.”

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Spike woke up in the late morning the next day. Xander was long gone, as Spike knew he would be. And still they had not got around to talking about the witch. It would need to be done sooner rather than later, but Spike was at a loss as to how to deal with it.
She was on to them now, so there was no way to trick her into giving up the spell ingredients, her and the blonde witch would be guarding them with their lives.

Spike had considered asking Clem for a bit of help, but if it got out that the slayer was dead then all hell would break loose. Spike snorted. That wasn’t something he would have ever thought to be bothered about.

Something had to be done, but what? Spike hauled himself out of bed and stood under the shower for a good long while running various plans through his head. None were any good, and he just kept coming back to the same thing. If Xander wasn’t going to help, she wouldn’t have her three.

Back in the bedroom, Spike found his clothes hanging over the back of a chair, alongside a thick, folded blanket. There was a sticky note attached, which read ‘Sun proofing in case you want to make a break for home, or maybe stalk me at work again this afternoon. X’. Spike smiled. Nice bit of forethought there.

Most of the day, he spent with feet up, a remote control in one hand and a mug of blood in the other. Not a bad day in all, except for that nagging feeling that he just wasn’t doing enough to stop the stupid woman resurrecting the slayer.
Shortly before sundown, Spike grabbed the blanket and his coat and headed out for Xander’s worksite. Perhaps tonight they could put their heads together for something a bit more productive.

The street lights were coming on and the parking lot was almost cleared when Spike arrived. He had no need of the shielding, so folded the blanket and waited by the car with a smoke.

It was a very different Xander who strode across the dirt lot towards him in the dwindling light; nothing like the happy confident Xander of last night.

Hunched over, face tight with anger, Xander barely even looked up as he approached. Spike pushed himself off the car and waited.

“We’re patrolling tonight, and don’t even bother arguing with me, Spike.” Xander beeped open the doors and threw himself in behind the wheel.

Spike said nothing, just stared after him, sighed and got in too.

“Don’t say anything, okay? We’re going to some cemetery or other, and I so don’t want to hear about why I can’t.” Xander glanced at him quickly before pulling the
car out onto the road with a burst of gravel from under the tyres.

“Right then, mate. How ‘bout mine? That way when you get your arse kicked I don’t have so far to carry you.”

“Who says I’m going to?” Xander asked with a scowl.

“I do. Look at you. Stressed, tense, all wound up over something. You’re gonna get out there and take on something big and mean and it’s going to beat the living shit out of you. And if it doesn’t, I might, just for being so bloody stupid.”

Most people quietly seethed, but Spike swore when Xander did it just now, in the confines of the car, it almost had its own sound. “I don’t want to hear this, okay? I just need to let off some steam without having you on my back as well.”

“What you mean as well? You want to tell me what’s wrong with you?”

“Right now?”

“As good a time as any, isn’t it?”
They were stopped for a red light, and Xander considered Spike carefully before he spoke. “You won’t try to stop me going to patrol?”

YES! The demon screamed. And Spike was of a mind to go along with that. In the state Xander was in, he was likely to hurt himself more than any demons or fledges. But Spike was learning. The possessive protection of the demon was not an attractive trait, and he would do well to ignore it as best he could. It was a struggle, but being aware of it was half the battle. He hoped.

“You’re a big boy Harris, you know what you need. But just so we’re clear on this, you get yourself mortally wounded and before you gasp your last, I will bloody well turn you and personally kick your stubborn arse from here to soddin’ eternity.”

Xander’s voice rang as hollow as Spike’s threat. “Yeah, fine, whatever.” He clenched the steering wheel tighter for a moment, the white of his knuckles stark against the tanned skin on his hands. “Any phoned me just before I left.”

Spike’s jaw clenched tight containing the automatic growl. “Again?”

“Yeah, again.”
“You hung up on the dopey cow, didn’t you?”

Xander sighed. “You would have thought so, wouldn’t you?”

“Bloody hell, mate, you’re a glutton for punishment. What did she say?”

“Same old. But with some kind of threat this time.”

“A threat? What the bloody hell is she playing at? You aren’t together; doesn’t the silly bint get this?”

“Yeah she does now I think. That’s the problem; she’s getting desperate and running out of ideas.” Xander flicked his gaze across at Spike, then focused on the road again “Spike, I just don’t get it. I don’t want her. I’ve told her that time and again. Why would she still chase me?”

“She was a demon for a long time. There’s gotta be some residual traits there, right. Who knows how that makes her think?” Spike twisted in his seat to face Xander, reaching out to knead at the strained muscles in the back of Xander’s neck. “So what did she want then, eh?”

Xander leaned into his touch, but his grateful smile was quickly replaced by a frown. “Same thing. Take me back or else.”
“Or else? Or else bloody what?”

“Yeah, that part of it all was less than clear. I’m really not sure what she meant. She said something like ‘Xander we were good together, we deserve another chance, blah blah blah’. I told her it was over, I didn’t want to have to tell her again, she knew this- same old thing, she just doesn’t hear it though.”

“And the threat?”

“Right, yeah. So she says ‘if you won’t reconsider us, you’ll make me do things I don’t want to do. I can make things very bad for you.”

“What does she mean by that?”

“I don’t know. Is she gonna break in and nail my shoes to the floor? Cut the legs off my jeans? Slash up my sofa? Who knows?” Xander’s forehead creased. “I wonder if D’Hoffryn did something to her brain that last time.”

Spike shook his head. “Doubt it, not really his style. Might just be the stress, mate. Demon, human, demon failure, human again- could well have just got to her at last.”

“I guess. Anyway I don’t know what she meant. But really, what can she do?”
“Any number of things,” Spike said honestly. He had no idea what, unless she was referring to demon contacts. But the woman scorned thing was her gig, doubtful there was another vengeance demon out there pulling the same trick. And anyway, she was cast out of the fold, it was unlikely they’d have a bar of her now.

“Alright,” Xander said with a resigned sigh. “Put it this way then. What can she do that I can stop?”

“Unless you know what it is, then there’s not much you can do. I’d say she’s bluffing, getting desperate. She won’t do anything.”

“You think? I suppose you’d know better than me, with the demon and all.”

Spike smirked. “Nah, mate. I haven’t got a clue, I was just trying to make you feel better.”

“Great. Thanks. I don’t know what I’m more worried about, her threats or Willow’s spells. Could you imagine the grief they’d give me if they ever got together?”

A sickening thought crossed Spike’s mind. “That likely to happen?”
“Not a chance. They never liked each other much. It was kind of a rivalry thing. You know, best friend versus girlfriend. They were never close.”

“Were,” he said thoughtfully. “And now?”

Xander shrugged as he pulled the car into the parking lot at Spike’s cemetery. “I don’t know. I can’t see why it would change.”

Spike could. Ex girlfriend rejected. Best friend banished from the apartment in favour of the vampire everybody loved to hate. Red and the demon bint. Throw in the blonde, and it was a match made in hell. Perhaps that thought was best kept to himself until he was sure.

The idea took hold, and Spike knew that tomorrow while Xander was at work, he would have a bit of time to check things out himself. In the meantime, perhaps Xander was right. A bit of patrol, a good fight or two might do them both the world of good.

Spike climbed out of the car and met Xander as he unloaded the weapons. He was pleased to see Xander loading his pockets with stakes, a couple of small knives and a few vials of holy water.

As Xander reached to shut the boot, Spike quickly pulled out a long handled axe and thrust it into Xander’s hands.
He might not be about to stop him patrolling, but Spike would be damned again if he was going to let him go out there less than fully armed.

Xander accepted it with a displeased frown, but no argument, and they headed off into the shadows to do battle with their various demons.

**Part Thirty-Seven**

It was early afternoon, and the smoke from his cigarette curled slowly around Spike’s head as he stood in the deep shadows watching the back of the Summers’ house. Every now and then a slight breeze would ruffle the leaves above his head, and Spike felt the pinpricks of light dance across the back of his hands.

He didn’t know what he was expecting to see, but there had to be something. The witch had her plans; Xander’s ex had something up her sleeve, and it all seemed just too coincidental. Too convenient.

The woman might not have the demon abilities anymore, but the damning and cursing of wrong-doing men was not just an added extra of being a vengeance demon, it was the woman herself who fancied that line of revenge.
He’d not wanted to talk it over with Xander. But the thought had taken hold last night and as much as he’d tried to reason it away, he couldn’t shake it. Xander said the woman and the witches weren’t friendly and he didn’t think they’d get together, but anything was possible in Spike’s mind.

It was especially possible in Spike’s mind as he’d lain there watching Xander sleeping. Who would have said the two of them would get together? And yet here they were. If he and Xander could get past old issues, then who was to say the women couldn’t do that very thing too.

Spike crushed the cigarette under his boot and shifted impatiently. There was nothing going on here. No sounds from inside the house, except for the Niblet singing and the blonde witch cleaning.

Maybe it was time to give it up. He peered around the edge of the bushes he was standing in and cursed the sunlight for what felt like the thousandth time. The phone had rung and Red had left a few hours ago; he’d not been able to follow. By the time it would be dark enough to move around freely, she could be anywhere.
When another half a dozen butts littered the ground, Spike was done with procrastinating. He was just about to leave when the sound of a familiar engine rumbled down the street. In less than a minute, it drew closer and the car slowed as it turned into the drive.

The witch was back. Right then. Now all the waiting might pay off.

Spike tuned out the sounds around him and focused on the voices inside the house. Still too far off for him to pick up anything, Spike was considering a move closer in when he heard Willow’s voice raised.

“Dawnie we’ll just be out back here, can you go up and vacuum your room please?”

Spike smiled to himself as he heard the stomping feet and the words of protest the girl muttered to herself floated out of the open bedroom window.

The door swung open and the two witches made their way down to the garden chairs. Spike carefully pushed himself further back into the shadows and listened. He could barely see them now, but their voices came to him clearly enough. Red was speaking.
“Anya was so upset when I got there, I haven’t seen her like that before. She’s always so strong.”

“So why did she call you, Will?”

“Oh. Apparently Xander was really rude to her this time.”

“I don’t understand why he’s being like that with her. I thought he’d be happy she’s back, I thought he would have missed her.”

“I don’t think we can second guess Xander anymore. Not now that he’s spending so much time with Spike. Who knows what Spike’s been telling him?”

Spike forced himself to remain still and silent.

“Whatever it is, it means that we’ve lost any chance with Xander as our third.”

“I still can’t believe he threw you out of his apartment like that. Even after Spike attacked you for no reason, he didn’t even try to help. That’s just not Xander. He’s changed so much.”
Spike dug his fingernails in to his palm. Sunlight and the chip was all that saved the lying bint from his anger.

“Yeah, sweetie, he has. But we don’t need him anymore. She’s agreed.”

Spike could hear the smile in the blonde witch’s voice. “She did? That’s great.”

“She said that once we bring Buffy back, and Xander sees it’s all okay, then he’ll listen to her. He’ll be happy Buffy’s back and that she helped. He’ll be happy enough that he won’t listen to Spike anymore. That’s Anya’s theory anyway.”

“So we can get started then? Do we have everything we need?”

“Uh huh. Now that Anya’s on board, we’re ready. We just need to get a few herbs fresh on the day and there’s a sacrifice that I’ll take care of, but other than that, we’re good to go.”

“Is everything safe? If Spike finds out-.“

“It’s all safe. I’ve warded the boxes so no one can find
them and even if they did, there would be no way to open them. We have the demon protection spells on us when we go out, and Anya too now. We know those work, Spike can’t touch us. Also I’ve uninvited him from the house, and it’s unlikely Xander will try to come over after what happened at the apartment. It’s all ready, baby.”

“So, not long now and we’ll have Buffy back.”

“And everything will be as it should be.” She gave a heavy sigh. “I miss her so much. Dawnie’s been so sad. And Giles. Xander too. Everything will be fine then. It will. Nothing can go wrong with this.”

“I believe you, Will. You can do this.”

“We can do it. Together.”

There was more of the touchy feely girl talk and patting of backs, but Spike tuned it out. Sometime this week, Red, the blonde and the demon woman were going to do this spell. He didn’t know where or when, they had everything they needed for it, and as far as he could see, there was little he could do to stop them. Especially if Red had mojoed the lot of them to be untouchable.
They went back inside not long after, and as soon as it was safe to move from the cover, Spike threw the blanket over his head and ran for the sewer access. There was nothing else he needed to hear.

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“What do you mean she uninvited you? How are you supposed to help Dawn?” Xander stood in his kitchen that night, a bottle of coke half raised to his mouth.

“She’s covering herself,” Spike told him. “She’s not stupid, no matter how it looks. She’s being very bloody methodical about this.”

“So what can we do? If you can’t get into the house, you can’t touch them, we can’t find the things they’re going to use, we don’t know when or where they’re going to do it-.”

“There’s one thing we could try.” Spike had been mulling it over all afternoon. It was something they’d avoided, but before now, he’d always thought they’d had some chance of stopping them. Now though, short of fatalities,
he was at a loss as to how to go about it.

“At this point in time, I’m about ready to consider anything.”

Spike nodded in agreement, but wondered if Xander really mean that. “The Watcher.”

“*Giles?*” Xander banged his bottle down on the counter.

“Yeah. Much as the man annoys me, he knows what’s what. He may just have enough pull left with the witch that he can reason with her. Failing that, he might have some resources to stop her.”

Xander ran his hands through his hair. “God, Spike, can we really ask him to do that? I mean this is *Buffy*. What if it goes badly, he was barely coping with her death the first time around.”

“Like you say, we can’t get to her or the ingredients. We can’t set other demons on her, not without alerting the whole soddin’ town to the fact that the slayer’s gone. This is going to happen if we don’t do something. You don’t want to bring in the Watcher, so can you think of anything else?”
“Wait!” Xander’s head snapped up. “What else did you hear today? There was more wasn’t there? More than them just having the ingredients and the protection. They have the three don’t they? Anya’s in.”

“Yeah, she is.” Spike knew something different had gone on between them this time. “How did you know? What happened?”

Xander sighed and shook his head. “It doesn’t matter what happened. It’s my fault it’s going to work.”

Spike was confused. “Your fault? How so, mate?”

“It just is; I’ll tell Anya I’ve changed my mind.”

“About?” He asked it, but Spike was sure he knew already. Inside the demon began to howl.

“You know the threat she made? She can make things bad for me? Willow told her about the spell and how I wouldn’t help, so Anya gave me an ultimatum. Take her back or she’d be their third.”

“And you said no.”
“Of course I did.” Xander shrugged. “There was no love lost between her and Buffy, or her and Willow for that matter. I never imagined she’d go along with it.”

“Woman scorned, mate. No telling what’s going through her head.”

“So all I have to do is call her back and tell her I changed my mind. Simple.”

And there it was. He’d known it was coming and a violent surge from the demon had Spike shouting and raging, reaching out to take Xander by the shoulders. “You will do no such fucking thing.”

Xander was startled, Spike could see it in his eyes and it was enough to make him let go and back off. “Spike calm down, please. I won’t mean it. I’ll just tell her that until we can think of something else. Something that doesn’t involve getting Giles into it.”

It was something, but it wasn’t enough. “No. Not even like that. You’ll go and tell her this and she’ll be all over you like a rash and I won’t stand for that.”
Xander stared at him, mouth agape. “You won’t stand for it? You’d rather they tried to bring Buffy back? You’d rather have to kill the result of their spell when it goes wrong? You’d rather take the chance that Dawn might see all that? What the hell do you mean you won’t stand for it? This is my fault, so it’s my decision.”

Spike shook his head sharply, but deliberately kept his distance from Xander. “What that woman chooses to do is not your fault, Harris. You are not responsible for her choices.”

“She made that choice because of me. How is that not my fault?”

“Xander, I’m not going to let you do it.”

The disbelief on Xander’s face was enough to tell Spike he’d gone too far, but it was too late. The idea that Xander would do this, even as a ploy was too much.

“Let me? Hold on a minute here. Now, I understand that the demon’s possessive, that you are possessive, but there is no letting, Spike. I’m an adult, you don’t get to say stuff like that.”
She would touch him. She would-. No too much too think about. “But you can’t bloody-.”

Xander held up a hand to stop him. “No. I can bloody do what I want to. It’s been what? A couple of days? No longer than that that we’ve been more than just friends. And what exactly are we? Do you even know? Because I sure don’t. But even so, I know you don’t get to use that word. Let. You never get to use that word with me.”

Xander snatched his keys up off the table and was halfway into his coat when Spike grabbed his arm.

Spike forced himself to remain calm. This had gotten out of hand, it was supposed to be the two of them against the women, not Xander leaving him.

“Xander. Please don’t do this. You know what that bloody woman’s like, she won’t leave you be once you tell her you’ve changed your mind. Can you cope with that? With how she’ll react? With what she’ll expect from you? I don’t know if I can.”

A pained expression crossed Xander’s face. He took Spike’s hand from his arm, but didn’t let it go. “What else can we do? If I can make her pull out of this then there’s
no one else. Do you understand that? They’ll never involve Dawn, so without me and without her, there’s no one else. It ends."

Bloody hell. They were so short on options, but giving up was out of the question. It didn’t leave much choice, but what Xander was about to do left Spike cold. “So you do this, but for how long?”

“What do you mean?”

The images of how it could go flashed through Spike’s mind but he pushed them away. “You go to her, you tell her you changed your mind, you’re taking her back. You do what you have to do to make her believe it. But for how long? As soon as she finds out you’re lying you can bet she’s right back to the witches again. So how long are you prepared to lie?”

Xander’s hand squeezed his convulsively and he stared for a long time. Spike saw so many expressions cross his face before the hardness settled and he knew a decision had been made. Spike knew he wouldn’t like it.

“As long as I need to. I’m sorry, Spike.” Xander pulled his coat the rest of the way on and moved towards the door.
Spike felt his face rippling, and battled the changes. The
demon screamed for him to stop Xander, but he knew he
couldn’t. Xander was right. He had no place issuing
orders, giving Xander permission to act. They were both
adults, and he had more than a century on Xander. In all
that time he had to have learned some control.

And what else could they do? If Xander’s actions could
hold the spell off, then that bought them more time to
come up with something. Spike was still not averse to
calling in the Watcher. This late in the game it might be
the only other option.

Xander had stepped closer and his hand rested on Spike’s
shoulder. “I don’t want this. I don’t want her. But if I
hadn’t refused her, she wouldn’t be doing this. I need to
try, Spike.”

Spike lost his battle and his face rippled one more time
before settling into the sharp angles and planes of the
demon. He pulled Xander into a rough kiss, conscious of
the sharpness of his teeth. “Do it,” he snarled, and threw
himself from the apartment.
Part Thirty-Eight

Spike knew he wasn’t thinking straight. He should have stayed away, shouldn’t have followed Xander. But as he ran from the apartment in a blind rage, hearing Xander’s car turn the opposite direction down the street, it was too easy to take the car and follow him.

The elderly driver stood in shock next to his mailbox, letters in hand and stared as Spike threw the idling car into reverse, and took off after Xander.

Spike arrived just moments after Xander, steered into a space two doors down where he couldn’t be seen, and waited. He’d driven most of the way with the headlights off, and was sure he hadn’t been noticed. Xander’s slow pace had given Spike time to calm down, and while he was still agitated and just plain pissed off with the decision Xander had made, he’d been able to rein in the demon.

Xander still hadn’t gotten out and now would have been
the perfect time to go and confront him, but even though Spike still thought Xander was doing the wrong thing, he knew he couldn’t stop him. He had no business telling Xander what to do. He’d made his feelings known and that was as far as he could go.

A slamming door caught Spike’s attention, and he saw the woman leaving her apartment building by the front path. That was the moment Xander jumped from the car and jogged to meet her.

Spike lowered the window and thanked the cover of darkness for ensuring he wouldn’t be seen while he listened in and kept watch over- no. *Spying*, that’s what it was. No point lying to himself. The woman wouldn’t hurt Xander, he didn’t need protecting here. No. Spike had to be honest with himself and say he was here with self-serving motives only. He wanted to see, he wanted to know.

The woman paused and looked cautiously at Xander as he approached. Not that he could do a damn thing about it, but Spike was prepared to leap from the car the moment she laid a hand on him.

All the calm he’d restored on the drive over was
forgotten, as Spike saw the tentative smile on her face. His hands gripped the steering wheel, and his knuckles shone white under the glare of the street lights. He silently dared her to touch Xander, then chip be damned, he would be there in an instant to deal with it.

“Xander, why are you here?”

Xander gave a brief nervous laugh. “Good question, why am I?”

“Did you come to yell at me some more?”

“I-, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled at you,” he said. “I’ve, um, been thinking.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed and her face grew suspicious. “About?”

“About, um, what you said, about us. I don’t think I gave you a fair chance.”

She shook her head. “You didn’t give me any chance.”

“Yeah, I know and I should have. I’m, ah, I’m sorry. I want to hear what you have to say.”
“Why?”

“Why?”

“Yes, Xander. Why? Why now? Why not yesterday, or the day before, or last week, or this morning? Why now?”

“Oh, I, um-.”

“This morning you told me to never speak to you again. That you couldn’t believe that I could consider being involved in something like that spell. That you could never be with anyone who would even think about such a-, what did you call it- an obscene act? So tell me Xander, what’s changed in the ten hours since you said get the hell out of my life?”

“I just-, I thought about it and I thought if you wanted it so much I should probably give you a chance. Hear you out. It would be stupid to throw away what we had.” Xander slowly reached out a hand towards her, and Spike growled low in his throat.

The woman jerked her arm away from his touch and scowled. “You want to hear me out? Ok, hear this. I don’t
believe you, go away, Xander.”

Spike slid down in the seat as the woman took a few steps his way.

Xander followed her. “Wait, Ahn-.”

“Don’t call me that,” she said, spinning around and pointing at him.

Spike’s demon raged, she’s too close, her hands are too close. He had one hand on the steering wheel, but the other was gripping the door handle.

Xander sighed. “Anya-.”

“You know what? We lived together long enough for me to know when you’re lying. You were never any good at lying, Xander, I don’t know why you thought you could start now.”

Xander threw his hands up. “I’m not-.”

“Give it up! You don’t want to listen to me; you’re not interested in giving me a chance. I know why you’re here Xander. It’s got nothing to do with us and everything to
do with that spell.”

“The spell? No, I-.”

“And if I couldn’t tell you were lying, I’d know anyway, you know why? Because we all know you and Spike are thick as thieves, and Spike was stupid enough to leave a pile of cigarette butts in the garden. Which means you know, Xander. You know that I’m helping them. That’s why you’re here lying to me.”

“Cigarette butts? So what, Spike is always there looking out for Dawn, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah he is, except Tara found them today, fresh butts, on top of the leaves and grass cuttings she’d spread under the bushes early this morning. So, Spike heard them talking, Spike told you, you came here. Simple as that.”

He thought back to that morning and clearly remembered how strong the smell of fresh cut grass had been as he’d dropped butt after butt to the ground. He cursed his carelessness.

“I didn’t-, I haven’t- it’s not-.”
Spike heard Xander fumbling awkwardly for words and knew that he wouldn’t be able to come up with anything.

“Forget it, Xander. It’s just too much for coincidence. And my decision’s made. You had a chance this morning and you blew it. I’m helping them.”

Xander seemed to have given up his pretence. “Dammit, Anya, why? You weren’t even friends with Buffy, not really. Why would you do this?”

Spike knew damn well why she would do it. Fucking vengeance demons. She might not have the connections anymore, she might not have the powers, but it was in her blood; it was how this one was wired. D’Hoffryn must have seen it a thousand years ago when he hand-picked her for her talents.

The woman rounded on Xander, her voice raised but not quite shouting. Her anger was clear in her face. Spike opened the car door and had one foot out, ready to run should she go too far.

Xander would be angry, there was no doubt about that, angry with the lack of trust and the implication that he
needed saving and protecting. But there was no way Spike would be able to control his demon if she did anything. He forced himself to sit still but couldn’t stop the low continuous growl that rumbled in his chest.

“I have nothing, Xander. Nothing. No power. D’Hoffryn saw to that when he sent me back. If I did have my power you would be first on my list. No matter how much I might regret it later, you rejected me when I came back Xander, time and again, when I needed you. Well, here’s the result. I might not be able to send you to a hell dimension, or-, or-, give you pus-filled boils. Hell, I can’t even give you a damned zit, but this I can do and I will do.”

“Jesus, Anya, don’t do this,” Xander begged. “It doesn’t make any sense. Please.”

Her tone was becoming vicious and Spike was more on edge, he pushed the car door open wider. “Woman scorned here, since when did that have to make any sense? Go home, Xander, there’s nothing you can say or do that’s going to make a difference anymore.”

The woman was pointing at him again, she was in his face and for Spike, that was just far too close. Her finger
was a hairs-breadth from Xander’s shirt and as unreasonable as he knew he was being, Spike saw red.

A car double parked in front of him and he vaguely registered the familiar vehicle and the three people inside, but his focus remained on Xander.

As the demon woman turned towards the sound of the car’s horn and waved, Xander followed and grabbed at her arm, putting them both out of Spike’s line of sight, behind a tall SUV parked in front of him.

“Get your hands off me!”

It was the woman’s voice, but without even thinking, Spike was launching himself out the door. Nothing mattered but for the fact that he couldn’t see Xander and their confrontation was getting serious.

As he rounded the front of the stolen car, he could hear the desperation in Xander’s voice- almost panic- and, fuck the consequences, Spike needed to get to him.

He knew there were other people on the sidewalk now too, the women, the girl, someone calling his name, but Xander was upset, Xander was out of his sight and Spike
was losing control of the demon.

He still couldn’t see what was happening, but he could clearly hear it and the demon drew its own conclusions.

Xander was yelling. “Any, no, stop.”

The demon woman was shouting back at him. “Leave me alone, Xander.”

There were other voices, some calling a warning to Xander, some shouting a warning that Spike was there.

There was surprised cry followed by a heavy thud, and as Spike reached the sidewalk he blocked out everything but the sight of Xander sprawled face down on the ground moaning and a pair of hands reaching down to him and the demon woman backing away towards the witches and their car.

Head down, Spike charged. Without another thought, without listening to the voice calling his name he ran for the woman. Someone reached out to him as he passed by Xander, and he pushed them roughly away, hearing a high pitched shriek, and a thump against metal as he shoved.
A searing pain immediately shot through his head and he screamed, but the demon was in control and Spike was running on fury. The woman had done something to Xander, Spike knew it. Xander was lying on the ground, in pain, and she was not going to live to see another day if he could help it.

He could hear Xander’s voice furiously calling to him to stop, he could hear the witches’ cries of outrage, but Spike ignored everything in his path and swung at the woman who had hurt Xander.

~~*~~*~~*~~

His head had burst. It must have. How could it hurt so much and not have split open? He couldn’t open his eyes. There was a cool wetness and the smell of blood was strong inside his nose. Spike tried to touch his face and groaned. His hand burned, the back of his hand, his fingers and knuckles.

There were voices. There was soft crying. He couldn’t make out the words; the sounds were muffled, coming to him as though through water. There was a louder sound,
a shouting, slamming and then an engine roared and tires screeched.

Burned rubber mingled with the scent of blood.

“Spike, get up.”

He was down? Spike tried shifting and felt the damp grass under his cheek. He was on the ground. Too hard. He couldn’t move.

“Get up, dammit.”

Someone was yelling at him. He couldn’t get his eyes open to see but he knew the voice.

Xander was pulling at his coat. “Get up!”

Spike thought he’d formed words, he tried. “Can’t.”

“You damn well can. Do you know what you did? Get the hell up on your feet.”

He’d never heard anger like that in Xander’s voice and directed at him. Not even before they were friends. Not even at the worst of times. Spike ignored the stabbing
pain, and managed to get to his knees. He opened his eyes slowly.

“She hurt you.”

“Dawn?”

What? Had Xander hit his head? Anya had hurt him, Spike had attacked. Why was Xander talking about the Bit?

“No, the demon.”

“Look at me Spike. Nobody hurt me, I’m fine.” Xander took deep steadying breaths before he went on. “Dawn is not fine. They’re taking her to the hospital, she needs stitches in her head.”

Spike was confused. Why would the girl need stitches, had she even been there? “I don’t-, what are you-. You were on the ground. I thought the woman-.”

“I tripped, Spike. I tripped over a trash can lid. Dawn got out of the car to help me and you slammed her into that SUV. You hit Dawn.”
Niblet? Spike tried to remember and through the haze of pain, the images came back to him. The girl had been in the car with the witches. Then she was next to Xander trying to help him up and Spike was gunning for the demon. Fuck no. The shriek, the thumping, it had been the Bit. She’d been between him and his target.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I hurt the girl?”

“You hurt both of them.”

But he had reason. He was defending Xander. He looked up at the angry face above him. “I thought you were-.”

Xander’s expression and his voice softened only slightly. He sighed heavily. “Why were you even here? You followed me? You don’t even have enough faith in me to let me do this on my own? So, there you go, look what’s happened. You hurt Dawn, you hurt Anya and judging by the blood coming out of your ears and your nose there, you’ve done yourself some damage too.”
Spike felt his head and Xander was right. There was a steady stream of blood from his nose and both ears. He wiped at it with his sleeve.

“I didn’t mean to hurt the girl.”

“But you did mean to hurt Anya.”

Spike nodded gingerly.

Xander just stared and said nothing for a long time. “I can’t go to the hospital, they don’t want me there. I’m going home.”

Spike got unsteadily to his feet. He stumbled and reached out a hand to Xander.

Xander stepped away.

Spike searched his face for some sign that he was misunderstanding what was happening here. “I’ll come with you, we can talk.”

“No, Spike. I’m going by myself.”

Not able to move fast enough to intercept him, not able
to raise the strength to shout for him to come back, Spike could only stand and watch as Xander got into his car and drove away without a backwards glance.

Part Thirty-Nine

It was always cold in his crypt.

He’d not noticed so much over those summer months when Xander was a regular fixture. But summer was gone and Xander was gone.

After Xander had walked away from him, Spike had watched and waited for three days. Standing in the crypt door, a growing pile of butts and bottles at his feet, he waited.

On the fourth day he went to Xander’s apartment.

The lights were off and his car was gone. Loathe to damage the door, Spike picked the lock and let himself
He didn’t need the half empty closet to tell him Xander wasn’t there. The scent of human was so faint, Spike knew he hadn’t been home for at least two days.

He walked a circuit of the apartment. There was nothing different- it was just empty.

No, there was something different. Taped on the front of the television screen was a folded sheet of white paper with his name scrawled across the front.

In two minds, Spike stared at it. A Dear John letter, he had no doubt. Spike fingered the bottom of it, then with a heavy sigh, ripped the paper off the screen and threw himself down on the sofa to read.

*Spike, I’m leaving...* It was as he’d expected.

*After what happened to Dawn and Anya, I need some time...* Not ‘what you did’ but ‘what happened’; no accusations, no blame. Still, he’d spooked Harris. He’d hurt the girl and Xander had run.

*I knew what you were, but we had something and I thought it wouldn’t matter. I was so wrong...* Spike had been right. No fucking surprise there. If Harris had
listened at the start, then it would be a different story now. Why hadn’t he insisted? He had a hundred plus years on Xander, why hadn’t he put a stop to it before it even began?

I’m taking that contracting work and I’ll be gone for a while. It’s not just about the thing with Dawn and Anya. They did it you know. They brought Buffy back... Spike didn’t even try to contain the snarl. They fucking did it. Those bloody arrogant witches went and did it.

I saw her, she seems okay... Okay or not, there was still the chance that it would all go to hell in a hand basket and who would they turn to to clean it up?

Giles is here for her so I’m leaving. Willow and Tara don’t want me around right now, neither does Anya. Buffy doesn’t seem to care either way, she’s so quiet. Dawn is upset with me, she wants me to stay. She doesn’t blame you. The others do though...

Images, memories flashed in Spike’s mind. A scream, a thud. That had been the girl. He’d hurt her. Spike shook his head to clear it, but he knew it wouldn’t help. Dawn might not blame him, but the women did. The Slayer would. Xander? He hadn’t said anything and Spike didn’t
want to dwell on it.

*He* blamed himself. Why shouldn’t everyone else?

There was more in the letter, apologies of a sort; hints that they might talk about it eventually. But Spike wasn’t sure if he wanted to talk about it. What was there to say? He’d lost the small amount of control he’d been clinging to. Hurt people he cared about. There was nothing worth saying. His apologies would fall on unbelieving or deaf ears.

Spike looked around the apartment one last time before he left and sighed. He’d been too comfortable. Too careless. He had no business getting involved with these people, no matter how happy he’d been with Xander. There was too much potential for disaster.

He’d been fucking right.

Spike shoved the letter into his pocket and locked the apartment behind him.
So, the world kept turning, Sunnydale kept up its thin veneer of normality in the day time, and by night Spike patrolled alone.

In the beginning, Giles had come to him and they’d had it out. There were accusations from the watcher –why hadn’t Spike told him their plans for Buffy? Why hadn’t he done more to stop them? But in the end it all rang hollow; she was back and the watcher was overjoyed.

The Slayer was back. Xander was gone and the Slayer was back.

It had been a long slow process falling in- in what- in something with Xander, but with Buffy, all it took was a few shared secrets, a measure of desperation on both their parts, and Spike found himself with a another body warming his bed.

Physically she was warm, but if truth be known, in every other way possible, she was hard and cold. A corpse to rival even his own.

He’d loved her once, and even though she liked to hear it on occasion now, he knew he didn’t feel it any more.
They were just convenient, and she told him as much the first time.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander came and went over the next year. He seemed to have eventually sorted things out with his women friends and they welcomed him back each time. They called him when something needed dealing with; whether it was a demon threatening the peace, or Red, or another apocalypse. And he came.

He always came back for them. He never stayed long. He got the job done, avoided Spike where he could, was polite but aloof where he couldn’t. Spike often got the feeling that Xander wanted to talk to him, but aside from the niceties, it never came about. Along with that was a definite ‘do not approach’ air about the man.

They might not be able to see it, the women, the girl, the watcher, but Spike knew. He knew that Xander was still guarded with them; still hurt. He knew that Red had a long way to go before Xander would trust her as much as he had before.
Spike followed him one time when he was home. Only once. When he saw Xander leave a bar with another man, when he saw the heated glance the man threw Xander’s way as they got into his car, Spike decided he was better off not knowing. He’d seen Xander smile back, the expression not quite reaching his eyes and that mollified him somewhat. It bothered him, seeing Xander with someone else, but Spike was surprised that the jealousy and possessiveness inside him was so easy to control now.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike wondered if he and Buffy hated each other. He knew they didn’t really like each other and there was definitely no love between them. He was sure of that now. So why did he let her use him like that? Why did she let him? Did it really bear further examination? Spike often pushed the thoughts aside and let things take their course.

She was warm and willing, but she was not Xander. When she came to him, what they did together was just an act, nothing more to it. He kept his eyes closed, not imagining someone else, just not wanting to see that this
wasn’t Xander. Sometimes she would call him on it, ask why they did this, why he wouldn’t look at her, but just like him, she didn’t really want to talk. Not until the end.

It was almost summer again when she came to him in the cavern under his crypt and spoke gently.

“‘I’m no good for you.’”

Spike smiled and shook his head knowingly. “We’re no good for each other. This was a bad idea from start to finish.”

She flinched at that but then nodded. “We used each other.”

“Didn’t help any, did it?”

She gave a tiny wry smile. “I never thanked you for trying to stop her. Willow I mean.”

Spike dipped his head in acknowledgment and they were silent for a time.

“You’ve got feelings for someone, haven’t you?” she asked eventually. “I mean, someone not me.”
Spike let random images race through his head. A panting, sweating man deep inside him. Dark hair flopping over his face, hiding his eyes, just as he’d hidden his fears from Spike and just as they’d hidden themselves from the others. It hurt.

Sadly, Spike nodded. “Yes.”

“She doesn’t care about you?”

He locked eyes with her and kept his gaze steady. “He. And I don’t know. He doesn’t know. Anyway, he’s gone.”

Spike had to give the girl credit; she took that in her stride. He saw some surprise on her face, then a sad smile. She knew. He may make fun of her being blonde and stake happy, but when she wanted to, she could connect the dots.

“I’m sorry.”

Spike snorted. “Yeah. Everyone’s always sorry.”

“I am sorry.” She met his eyes. “William.”
“No, pet. It’s not William. It’s Spike he ran from. Spike he was scared of. There wasn’t enough of William there for him.”

A thought began to form in Spike’s mind.

~*~*~*~*~

It took months.

Months of travel, months of paying for information, then it was over in hours. So many times during the trials he thought he would die, but so many times a face flashed in his mind and he kept on fighting.

He won. He won back William. Spike didn’t know if it would be enough. Hell, he didn’t even know if he would survive the pain, the horror and the guilt of his last century.

It got worse when he went back to Sunnydale. Xander was gone again. His apartment was empty, furniture covered. Must have gone on a long job. Spike ignored the voice that tried to tell him Xander might be gone for good, that Spike may have chased him so far that he
couldn’t find his way back.

Spike couldn’t go back to his crypt. But he found himself a place in the dark, under the new school and let the voices tell him things. It was a confusion of images and Spike couldn’t tell what was real and what wasn’t.

Xander came to him, as did Buffy and countless accusing faces he barely remembered. But then they were gone and Spike never knew if they’d been there at all.

He did know he had a tenuous hold on his sanity, if, in fact, he had any hold at all. The soul that burned away inside him kept him in the dark. He was a monster, he shouldn’t be with people. No wonder Xander had left him. It didn’t matter what they’d felt, Xander knew what he was, and he’d left. That was a good choice. Yes, best choice.

The real Buffy found him eventually. Took him out into the light, chased away his demons. Some of his demons, not all. One of them was worse, Spike knew. It wasn’t a demon, it was bigger, badder, older. It stank of evil and corruption, but then so did he. It wouldn’t leave him in peace, it sang to him and wouldn’t let his mind heal, but his insanity scared the humans so he covered it. He faked
sane.

They needed him to fight. He might have the spark inside but he was still a monster and they were back to this again. What does Spike do? He comes when the Scoobies call, he does the dirty work. Oh, and this time it was going to be the dirtiest.

~*~*~*~*~

Buffy was different. So was he, but considering what he’d been through to get his soul, it was a given. Buffy was kinder. Softer. Harder in a way too, because of what this new evil was asking of her. A new kind of leadership that she really wasn’t ready for but took on anyway.

She fought the evil and she fought for Spike. She stood up to the others when they questioned why he was there. There was nothing between them now, but once there had been something.

She sat with him and fought with him while the darkest thing they’d known tried to own him, to control him. She smiled when they found the trigger and Spike would no longer be anyone’s bitch unless he wanted to be.
She sat with him while he bled. While the chip in his head misfired over and over again till he wished he could die one last time. She took him back underground to find the answers.

She gave him back his freedom.

He was souled. He was chipfree.

But Xander was still gone.

Spike had thought the soul may be enough to change Xander’s mind, let Xander see that he could be in control of himself, be a better man. But he stayed away. So what use was this bloody soul to him now?

Months later, he found out.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander was back. They’d called him and he’d come, as he always did. They’d called him because it was the end. Again. But this time it was likely that it would be the end of some of them. Highly likely that it would be Spike’s
The Slayer had handed him his death sentence on a chain and he’d accepted it.

There were evacuations and potential slayers and rumblings from below. And in the middle of that, on the last night before, Xander found him.

Spike was alone, sitting on the edge of his bed.

The footsteps on the basement stairs were a familiar sound that Spike had never dared to hope would again be moving his way. So many times over the last year, almost two, he’d stood in the shadows and watched Xander leave again, heard the steps fade away.

He’d known it was his fault. He’d driven Xander away because he wasn’t strong enough to hold back his demon. But now he was and Xander saw it. Spike supposed that Xander had done his own kind of soul searching in his time away.

Spike wondered if he should be offended, pissed off that now he came; that before, Spike just wasn’t good enough. But this was the end and there was so much
more to it than that. What use was there in anger or grudges? None that he could see.

Xander’s eyes dropped to the medallion in Spike’s hand. “You really going to do this?”

Spike smiled and tapped his chest. “Gotta do the right thing now, don’t I? Gotta be the champion. Can’t have Broody Pants getting all the glory, can we?”

Xander smiled and sighed, but stayed close by the bottom of the stairs. “I wasted a whole lot of time, didn’t I?”

“You and me both, mate.”

Xander took a few steps further into the room. “It was a good summer, wasn’t it?”

Spike nodded slowly. Even with the pain of coping with the Slayer’s death, Xander was right. “Yeah, it was.”

“I wasn’t ready then. It was too much. I thought I could do it, but…” he left the sentence hanging and Spike didn’t push. He knew how it was. Spike’s loss of control had opened Xander’s eyes to what he’d really gotten
into. Spike couldn’t blame him for running.

“Let’s forget it, yeah? You needed some time and distance and it hasn’t done me any harm either.”

Xander pointed to the medallion and raised his eyebrows. “Sure?”

Spike snorted. “Point taken. No harm up till now.” He fingered the medallion. “I got my soul, the chip’s gone. The witches can finally stand to be in the same room as me. Not that I bloody cared.”

“Course you didn’t.” There was the smallest of smirks on his face.

“So what brings you down here?”

Xander glanced down at his feet, then wandered off around the basement, picking things up and putting them down again. “I don’t know. Loose ends?”

Spike watched him for a while, then lit a cigarette. “That what I am?” he asked, blowing the smoke towards the open window.
“No. It’s what we are.” Xander stopped his pacing and faced Spike. “I left it too late for this Spike, but I was wrong to leave like that. Even more wrong to not come back and face you. The thing with Dawn and the possessiveness before that. I tried to ignore it but I couldn’t. I denied what I was feeling. Yes, I was excited, but more than that I was scared and I couldn’t tell you.”

“You can now, though?”

“Yeah, another year older and wiser, well, two years older I guess, or close enough.” Xander shrugged.

“So what now?”

He smiled and crossed the room to crouch in front of Spike. “Now? Now is all there is left isn’t there? Tomorrow might be the grand finale and there won’t be another now.”

“I suppose we’d better make the most of it, hadn’t we?” Spike said, as he reached out a hand to Xander.

~*~*~*~*~
Spike was burning. From the inside out, he was on fire.

They’d fought well, there were losses, but the witch’s spell had worked a treat and there was less death than they’d expected. The Slayer had been down but only for a moment.

Now they were all gone. There was just him and the Slayer. She was crying, he was burning, and again, there were those familiar footsteps coming for him.

No, not this time. There was no saving him now. This time they were coming for her.

“Buffy? You have to leave. Come on.” Xander ran down the stone steps and grabbed at her arm, shoving her towards the stairs.

Blinding light shone from Spike’s chest and the fire worked its way though his body. Debris rained down around them and world shook.

“Xander, get her out of here,” Spike shouted, unsure if his voice carried or it too was taken by the flames.
Xander’s voice cracked as he called out. “Spike, take it off, come with us. You’ve done enough now.”

“No, I’m finishing this one. You need to go.”

Xander took a few tentative steps towards him, but jumped back as more heavy stones fell from above. “Spike!”

“Out, Harris. This is it. You have to-.” Spike couldn’t help it, he’d tried to ignore the heat but it was too much. He let out a scream, and from the corner of his eye he saw Xander reaching for him. “GO!”

Xander backed away but faltered when Spike bit off another scream.

“*Please!* The light from his chest increased in intensity and Spike closed his eyes against it. He heard an anguished cry then pounding footsteps and knew that Xander and the slayer were gone.

Spike opened his eyes and watched it end.

~*~*~*~*~
Xander stood at the edge of the hole and stared down into the remains of Sunnydale. Whatever was left of Spike was in there somewhere, if there was anything left.

More than a year ago he should have had the guts to go to Spike; to tell him he’d known how big a mistake it had been to leave. But he hadn’t. He’d been ashamed of his own fears, angry at himself for letting it get the better of him after he’d insisted it didn’t matter. Then time had just gotten away from them.

Time was up now; he’d left it too late.

A small warm hand slipped into his, and Buffy leaned against his side.

“I’m sorry, Xan.”

Xander stared down at her. “You knew?”

She nodded.

“Yeah, I’m sorry, too.” He sighed.

“Let’s go, huh?”
He didn’t know where they were going, but Xander let her steer him back towards the bus. There’d be time to work out destinations later.

**Epilogue**

It was hot in the full sun, so Xander spent the day working in the shade. Some of the old graves needed a bit of a patch up, and the newer ones, big marble affairs, needed a spit and polish.

It was the perfect job for him. Working maintenance and grounds keeping in the old cemetery during the day, and locking himself in the safety of the high garden walls around his caretakers cottage by night.

His job left him plenty of time to think. But time had passed now and thoughts of Spike, while still frequent, were less painful. More often, they brought a smile to his face. They’d not had long, and Xander wasn’t even really
sure what they’d had, but it had been a good thing. More than anything, he wished he had it back.

Xander stopped work for a moment, sat on a grave and let memories of that summer wash over him. He’d been a fool to have left like he did, but there was no point in punishing himself over that anymore. He focussed instead with longing on their last night together, in Buffy’s basement.

Eventually, the shadows crept over the cemetery, and Xander realised he’d lost track of time again; dusk wasn’t far off. He shook off the melancholy, collected his tools, and headed home before the sun set.

Xander’s new home was on the far edge of the cemetery, and, as soon as he’d moved in six months ago, Willow and Tara had seen to it that the house had protection spells up the wazoo. He felt safe now.

Xander fingered the small pouch in his pocket, and mumbled a few words to remove Willow’s lock from his gate. He smiled to himself as he headed for his front door, knowing that the gate behind him would keep any unwanted visitors out. The house was small, but it was all he needed now. He’d had nothing when he came.
After he’d left Sunnydale, Xander had wandered for a while, before settling on this job on the outskirts of LA. He’d spent years in cemeteries and it was the last place he expected to find himself. But this was different. Sure there were the usual demon lurkers at night, but that wasn’t his concern anymore, not now that the world was crawling with slayers.

No, his concern was giving the dead the dignity they never had in Sunnydale. He cleaned up after the slayers and monsters. He disposed of the demons that didn’t ‘go poof’, he repaired the smashed headstones, kept the wards on the crypts so no nests would form, he tended the gardens, chased out the teenagers full of bravado; and he loved it.

Generally he loved it. For the last few days though, just before dusk, he’d felt like he was being watched. There was no one there that he could see, but he was sure someone was tracking him, following him. Tonight, on his way home, he’d been almost certain there were footsteps behind him.

Once, he might have had Buffy or even Faith at his beck and call, but they’d moved on, and he didn’t have any
kind of relationship with the local slayers. He kept in touch with everyone, but not often. He let them know he was okay, and checked on them every now and then, but mostly, Xander kept to himself.

The next day, he worked as normal, but paid more attention to the sounds around him. Again, in the late afternoon, someone was there. He was sure of it. He’d worked there long enough now to recognise the normal ambient noise, but this was different; a slight rustling of leaves, snapping of twigs.

Far from scared, Xander was just annoyed. He didn’t need this, he was past this. This was Sunnydale crap that he just didn’t want any part of anymore.

“Alright, give it up. Whoever you are, I can hear you.” Xander held his rake tightly as he turned full circle, peering into the thick cover of bushes. “Come on, I’m busy here and you’re wasting my time with your non-stealthy lurkiness.”

He didn’t know what he expected, but what he saw emerging from the cover of trees was not it.

Suddenly, Xander’s body was just too heavy for his legs
and his head spun so fast, he knew he must have fallen asleep in the sun. That was the only explanation for what he was seeing. His legs gave out and Xander sat heavily on the grave behind him.

The hair was the same, bright bottle blonde. The duster looked new, too shiny. The boots were as old and scuffed as Xander remembered, and the smile. More tentative than he remembered, cautious-scared maybe, yet so familiar.

“Xander?”

Xander closed his eyes and shook his head vigorously. Nope that wasn’t going to help. He really was awake, this really was happening.


“Ask the Powers, ask the gods, ask-, well, I just don’t know, mate. Someone wanted me back, but I don’t have an answer for you. So yeah, I’m still dead, I’m just back.”

Xander flinched away as Spike neared. This just couldn’t
be. He’d seen Spike burn, he’d seen Sunnydale collapse on itself. On Spike. “I’m asleep again, I’ve had this dream before.”

Spike laughed softly. “No, Harris, you’re awake.”

The stone of the grave was hard and cool beneath him and Xander didn’t need that or the pain of his nails digging into his palms to tell him Spike was right. “You’ve been following me? It was you?”

“Ah, yeah it was. I didn’t know how to do this.”

Xander’s brow furrowed. “I still can’t believe it’s you, you can’t be real.”

“I wasn’t for a while, but I am now.”

At Xander’s confused grunt, Spike just shook his head. “That part’s not important.” He sighed and inched closer. “I’ve been looking for you for so long. I was just about to give up.”

Xander watched him with a cautiously eye but didn’t back away as Spike sat on the other end of the gravestone. “How, um, how long?”
“Since I came back? A few months. I didn’t have much in the way of a body for a while, but as soon as I did, I tried to find you. I called the Watcher but he wouldn’t tell me where you were, told me not to call Buffy or the Bit either.”

Xander knew he must have misheard. “What do you mean? Giles would have told you.”

Spike shook his head. “He cares about you, that man. He said you’d been through enough, you were putting Sunnydale behind you; they all were. Told me not to contact anyone, that there were enough slayers around now that I should pay attention to him.”

“So no one else knows?”

“Aside from whoever brought me back? Only the Poof’s lot, the Watcher, and now you.”

“How did you find me then?”

“Chance, luck, coincidence, fate- who knows? A few days ago, I was in one of Angel’s cars, tailing a demon. He drove by here, I followed and I saw you. Simple as that.
Never been out this way before, but there you were. I came back the next day, waited till it was almost sundown, and I saw you again. Didn’t know what to say though, did I?”

Xander stared. This was real. Spike was here. Spike was three feet away from him. He had no idea what to say, and eventually Spike must have interpreted that as a dismissal because he nodded with resignation, stood up, then turned as though he was going to leave.

Could Xander let him go a third time? No. That wasn’t even an option. If, as Spike suggested, there was someone or something involved in bringing him back, Xander suspected there was likely to be an agenda. There’d have to be a price to pay, but right now, he just didn’t care.

“Spike!” He jumped to his feet, leapt forward and grabbed Spike by the arm, spinning him around.

Spike was back and Xander could not remember ever feeling like this. The relief, the joy, the pure happiness. They were in each other’s arms before Xander even knew he’d done it. He clung to Spike, feeling the familiar muscular body against his own and knowing he would
not be able to let go any time soon.

Xander didn’t know how long they would have together, but this time, he wouldn’t waste it.

*If you’re interested, the title came from Keats, the Human Season: “Four Seasons fill the measure of the year; There are four seasons in the mind of man.”*

The End