Pairing: Spike/Xander (of course)
Rating: NC17. Not a lot of sex, but what there is, is very graphic.
Disclaimer: The Bee has no claim on any of the characters she plays with.
Summary: HAU. This story takes place in the innocent summer of 1965. The country is caught up on the early stages of Viet Nam and on the verge of social explosion. However, all of this has not yet touched the teens of Sunnydale High. This is their last big summer of freedom before they start their final year of high school and are then forced out into the adult world. They are a tight group led by Xander Harris whose main interest centers around the sun, the surf, and the size of the waves.

Complicating the simplicity of Xander's life are a girlfriend demanding a commitment, the chance to buy the car of his dreams, and the sudden introduction of a newcomer that shakes up everything Xander ever believed about himself.

This is a coming of age story for all the teens involved and for the country as a whole.

Warnings: The teens in this story are 17 or 18 and this does not contain underage. Although the characters are borrowed, this does not relate to any season of BTVS.
Authors note: This story takes place in the 1960's therefore, the slang, references and phrases reflect that. Some of the terms may be considered not PC by today's standards.

The Bee greatly appreciates readers who take the time to comment. Spelling and punctuation checked by Silk_Labyrinth. Remaining boo boos are by the Bee's choice. Special thanks to Petxnd, a great friend who does the banners and patiently prereads the Bee's stories.

Special thanks, as always to my dearest friend Petxnd for the wonderful banner

Hang Ten

by
BmbbBee

Part One
The bell rang loudly and the world exploded.

The heavy double doors on the front of the Sunnydale High School flew open and the summer of '65 had arrived at long last. It had been months of studying math and English. It had been boring science labs and challenging debates in Current Affairs.

It had been drudgery broken briefly with sock hops and sporting events. It had been warm days and cool nights and it had seemed to drag on at a torturous pace until, finally, the calendar page flipped and the arrival of June signaled the start of their season of final freedom.

For the cluster of friends that made up the tight, popular clique that ran Sunnydale High, it was to be their last, wild fling. It was the three months before the beginning of their senior year and the graduation ceremony that would cruelly boot them from childhood directly into the adult world. A foreign planet of work, the military or, for a select few whose parents could afford it, college.
Preferably miles away.

Their group was a solar system of companionability whose center was the sun. The one who, unquestionably, was considered the head of pack. The golden boy. Xander Harris. Contrary to the California stereotype of blond and blue eyed, Xander was dark. He had shaggy brown hair and eyes so deep they nearly appeared black.

His skin was olive, tinted with a tan that colored him year-round and deepened in the summer giving him an exotic, race-questionable look that he seemed oblivious to. He was handsome, athletic and beamed with a bright and ready smile that earned insane giggles from the younger girls and wistful sighs from his female classmates. He was effortlessly charismatic.

Xander comfortably wore every adjective that was pinned on him in a whisper. He was keen, cool, bad and boss. He was the star of every sporting team the school offered and he had taken Sunnydale to State for the past three years. He had a full-ride
scholarship to Cal State after graduation but coolly remained uncommitted.

Scholastics held little interest for him and, if the truth were told, he only participated in the various sports the school offered to keep his body strong and toned for the one activity that really mattered to him. Surfing. If it were possible, Xander would have set his future on the occupation of professional surfer.

Shooting the curl and riding the waves. It was what he lived for. In that way, he was the quintessential California boy. He thrived in the salty spray of the ocean as he balanced his weight on the waxed board that skimmed the surface of the water. When it came to surfing, he was focused. He was committed and it was the top priority in his life.

A situation that slightly rankled Cordelia. He and Cordelia Chase had been going steady since last summer. A year. A length of time that had the gossipmongers nearly positive that the two most assuredly went all the way.
She was Xander's steady-ready by her choice and not Xander's, though he didn't actively object. Xander was a go-with-the-flow type of guy. Cordelia was a take-what-you-want type of girl. She called him. She hung around after all the football practices and she fed him the answers to all the algebra tests. She wore his class ring because she earned it. To her, he was her stepping stone to the top, and the best part was that he never pressured her to give it up. A few kisses and he put on the brakes.

Everyone, including Cordelia assumed they would marry after graduation. Xander gave it no consideration one way or the other. Tomorrow was too far in the future to be of concern today.

Firmly beside Xander in the center of this popularity universe were his best friends, Willow Rosenberg and Buffy Summers. The three of them were the original group. Started in kindergarten, they were the ones whose field of attraction drew the others in. Others who tried to stand in the group and be recognized. Few did.
Some of the people who orbited just outside the center circle were Jesse McNally, class clown, and Daniel Osbourne, school stoner. It was unclear to anyone why these were accepted and others were not. Some things in life required no inspection. They just were.

An orbit further out was filled with minor players that tried desperately to get into the core group and be noticed, but few had a chance. There was Riley Finn, football player and off and on of Buffy Summers. Even his connection to her did not gain him admittance. Dawn, Buffy's little sister, had a better chance than Riley, and her crush on Xander was nothing she was ashamed of.

There were others who identified themselves by self-proclaimed labels such as Tara Maclay: beatnik, Faith Lahane; tough girl, Harmony Kendall; school skank, and of course the local hoods, Jonathan and Warren. Some of the students chose their budding personalities by the politics of the day such as Charles Gunn who had taken an inordinate interest
in the growing unrest of the civil rights movement in the South. As one of the few Negroes in Sunnydale, he felt it was his obligation to stand up at every opportunity and declare society's injustices toward the Black Man. None of the white students, except Tara, paid him any mind.

So together, along with all the rest of this generation in the small California school, these students made up the class of 1966. A microcosm of the world as it was in the summer of 1965. A world on the brink of social change.

But for today, despite their diversity, they all had one thing in common. They were free. They laughed as they charged from the building for the last time. Jesse entertained them with his sing-songy rendition of "No more lessons, no more books. No more teachers' dirty looks." And they rolled their eyes at Willow's pouty assertion that she would miss attending class.

And they all followed Xander as he strode at a brisk walk down the street and away from the brick and
mortar of the already-forgotten school building.

"Damn, Xan, slow down." Jesse laughed at his friend's rapid gait. "You going down to the pier?"

Xander shook his head but never slowed. "Nah," too late in the afternoon. I'm headed home to finish laying another coat of wax on the board. I'm gonna hit the waves before the sun comes up tomorrow morning."

Cordelia walked a few steps behind, giving the impression she was with Buffy and Willow rather than look like a fool running at an undignified trot trying to keep up with the wide gait of her boyfriend. Idly, she fiddled with the mohair that was wrapped around Xander's class ring hanging on a chain around her neck. "So, Buffy, did you buy that polka dot bikini that we saw in Woolworth's?"

Buffy snorted. "You know the 'rents are total squares. I have my own money but they are buggin' out like if I wear something that shows that much skin, I will be branded as a total pig. They are from
Cordelia pulled her compact from her purse and checked her hair. She had paid a fortune to have it styled like Annette Funicello. Afterwards, she had it sprayed with half a can of Aqua Net in an attempt to keep it that way.

Willow walked alongside the other two, listening but contributing little. Willow was a late bloomer. Her breasts were smaller, her hips narrower and her face still had that round baby-fat look to it. Her only hope was a small picture of a girl she saw in a magazine. If the future of the fashion world was what this Twiggy represented, Willow was in fat city. So to speak. If not, she still had her mother's tired speech prophesying that one of these days she would awaken to find herself looking like Marilyn Monroe.

For now, she would wear her one-piece to the beach and watch with envy as the other girls bounced and jiggled their way across the sand to the wolf whistles and suggestive leers of the
handsome boys.

As her thoughts of boys came to mind, Willow stepped out of pace with her girlfriends and fell back with Oz who was shuffling behind. "Hey, Oz. What about you? You hanging at the pier with us tomorrow?"

Oz gave her that slow, lopsided grin that insinuated a dozen different, possibly illegal considerations. He finally capped it off with a shrug as he casually ran his hand over his favorite Ghoulardi tee shirt. "Nah. You know I'm strictly a hodad. 'Sides, I got some bitchin' mary jane squirreled away. I plan on celebratin' the first day of summer with some cartoons, a bowl of Cheerios and a toke or two once the old man goes to work."

Willow wrinkled her nose. She didn't get Oz. She liked him but just didn't get him. He could be so cute if he combed that wild red hair and maybe wore a cool button-down and some khakis like the rest of the guys. "Yeah, um, sure. Sounds neato. Well, if you change your mind...."
With nothing left to say, Willow ran to catch up with the others. The summer clock was ticking and they had a ton of fun to start cramming

Part Two

Xander was psyched. He was nearly giddy with relief as the weight of an oppressive educational system was lifted from his back and he was free to pursue the only thing in the world that mattered. Shooting the curl. Riding the waves. Hanging ten.

Surfing.

It was when he really felt alive. There was nothing like the salty ocean spray drenching your face and body as every muscle in your body strained to balance and maintain an upright position while you skimmed fluidly across the surface of the water.
One by one, the others had peeled off from the group as they headed in the direction of their own homes until only Xander was left to turn onto Maple Street and the shabby wood frame house that sat at the end of the block.

It needed painting. It needed a new roof. It needed a head of the house that could hold a job for more than six months at a time. Tony's new gig at the Timkin steel mill had them all crossing their fingers and holding their breaths. It was regular work that paid well and Xander and his mother, Jessica, prayed that Tony could leave the bottle alone and go to work each day. So far, so good.

Xander was two houses away when he spotted the station wagon sitting at the curb and knew that meant Uncle Rory was over for a visit. Not a good sign. Rory always traveled with a ready six-pack of Genesee. For the rest of the afternoon, the repetitious sound of the cans' church keys would ring with a pop and a fizz that signaled a good time was being had by both men.
Just as Xander reached his house and before he could charge in to assess the level of alcoholic joy, something stunning stopped him in his tracks. It was a sign, but not just any sign. It was a sign from heaven. A cardboard placard from God himself that caught Xander's eye and sent shivers of thrill zinging up and down his spine. It was a paper taped to the inside of the back passenger's side window of Uncle Rory's woody that read:

FOR SALE
$800.00
RUNS GOOD

Xander dropped the backpack off his shoulder and he stepped closer to read and reread the words he had only dreamed of. When he had convinced himself that it was true, he reverently walked the length of the old, lime green Chevy station wagon while his hand skimmed the length of the smooth, polished wood panel.

It was fucking perfect! Xander closed his eyes. He
could just see himself with his precious board strapped to the roof, zipping down the streets in the bitchin'est car in town. No more begging rides. No more asking his mother to run him to the shore like a child to the playground. He could be his own man. He could throw some clothes in the back, after he got rid of the empty beer can collection, and he could all but live at the beach.

Xander moved around to the front of the car and he draped himself over the hood and he rested his cheek on the still-warm metal as he did his best to engulf her in an embrace.

"Look at you, you beautiful bitch. You want to belong to me, don't you? You got it all, baby. Cool pipes, glass pack, four on the floor. You're fuckin' cherry, baby. Don't you worry. Somehow, I'm going to make you mine."

With that declaration, Xander snapped back up, grabbed his school bag and rushed inside. He knew if the engine had not cooled completely, Rory might still be sober.
The scene inside was exactly as he expected. His father, who had gotten off work at three, was already halfway through his first beer as Rory, sprawled on the couch, was starting his second.

As usual, the brothers were arguing politics or what they considered politics. Today's subject seemed to be the status of the conflict in an obscure spot of the world called Viet Nam. Rory seemed to think it was a big deal while Tony's contention was that it was a minor skirmish that Johnson would have settled in no time. Xander was not interested in either side. Since it was not even considered a real war, it would be long forgotten by the time he graduated next summer.

At the sound of the front door, Jessica stuck her head out of the kitchen doorway. "Hi, honey. Do you want some milk and cookies?"

Xander tossed his school bag toward the basement door by the stairway. He suspected his mother's cheerful mood would deteriorate quickly when she
discovered the moldy gym shorts he had found when he cleaned out his locker, but right now he didn't care. Breathlessly, he rushed into the livingroom and sat down beside his uncle.

"Hey, Ror, you got the woody on the block, huh? Damn, I didn't think you would ever let her go. So you want eight bills? Fuck, I'd just about eat a ripe turd to own her."

"Xander! Watch your mouth, young man!"

Xander waved his hand in the direction of his mother. "Wha? Oh, no, Ma. No cookies. So, what do you say, Ror. You want to cut your fave nephew a good deal on that badass piece of awsome?"

Xander leaned forward, his hands clasped together and his forearms resting on twitching knees as he awaited the answer that would change his life. Tony kicked back his recliner and scratched his nuts as he, too, awaited Rory's answer. Secretly, he knew there was no way his boy could come up with that kind of money but considering how badly the boy
wanted this, Tony chuckled at what promised to be entertaining.

Rory tipped his can and took the last swallow. He capped it off with a belch before leaning to the side and releasing a couple pops of a beer fart, all designed to help him think. "So, you covet the wheels. That right? I suppose you want to hop her up so she lays rubber while you cruise the streets for chicks, huh? Yeah, I gotta tell ya, she's a chick magnet. Drop down the back seat and there's plenty of leg room to work. I've laid some serious pipe in the back of that car."

Xander flinched as he wondered what he could use to scrub the ick factor from the car's carpet and, hopefully, the picture from his brain. Outwardly, he nodded his head in agreement and encouraged Rory to go on.

"Tell you what, since it's you, I can cut you a special deal. $700.00. That's still a lot of bread. Where you gonna get that many dead presidents?"
Xander frowned as he rubbed across the back of his neck. That much money was way out of his reach. It might as well have been a million dollars, but he wasn't ready to give up just yet.

"Um, well, I have a hundred saved from birthdays and such. Maybe I could give you that so's you don't sell her to someone else. As for the rest....."

Xander lifted his face and tried his best begging expression on a father who had been impervious to such things since Xander was five. As expected, Tony just hooted and popped another can. As Xander's brain scrambled between defeat and any other possible solution, another player joined the game.

"I'll help."

All eyes turned in astonishment as Jessica stepped into the room.

"I have some money put back. It isn't a lot, but if you can earn half, I'll put in the other half."
Xander leapt to his feet and dashed over. He grabbed up his mother and gave her a huge bear hug, his first in years, which caused her heart to swell and her eyes to burn with unshed tears. It was worth it. It was worth all the bullshit Tony would give her over hidden money and it was worth it not to be able to afford that new washer she had been saving for.

Xander kissed her cheek before dropping her back on her feet as he whispered in her ear, "Thanks, Mom. You're the best."

He then ran up the steps, two at a time, to grab the money he had hidden in a cigar box in a loose floorboard. When he came back, he carefully counted out the tens and fives onto the coffee table.

"...eighty five, ninety five, a hundred. That's it. My down payment. So you're gonna take the sign out of the window, right?"
Rory again counted the cash before stuffing it all in his pocket as he nodded his head. "Yep. One down and six to go. Now, don't think I'm gonna hold her forever. We gotta have a time limit on this little business transaction. Let's say, um, one month. Yeah, I think that's fair. Today is June fifth. On July fifth, you give me all my money and I give you the woody or the sign goes back in the window. That cool?"

"Deal! I'll get the money. You just wait and see."

Xander stuck out his hand and he and Rory shook on the deal. The smile on the boy's face masked the conflict in his soul. It probably meant getting a job. A menial, time-consuming gig that would keep him from spending his days in the sun and surf of the grand Pacific coastline. It was a major sacrifice, one he never would have considered, but one that he was now willing to make.

Still, thirty days wasn't very long. I would mean hitting the burger joints, drive thrus and the grocery stores first thing Monday morning. He would snap
every establishment in town that took on summer workers till he found one that would slide him a regular.

But that still left two days. One full weekend to celebrate life as a seventeen-year-old surf bum before he was forced to join the working society. His grin widened. He could surf the hell out of things in two days.

Part Three

"I appreciate the ride, Mom."

Jessica ran her fingers across her head in a futile attempt to tame the wild rat's nest that was her hair. "Sure, honey, no sweat. I just don't understand why you have to go so early. The sun is barely up and I didn't even get my coffee yet."
Xander chuckled. He hoped he never got old enough to even consider such a ridiculous question. Of course he never would have pointed that out. Not to the woman who not only suffered through twenty three hours of labor with him, as she often mentioned, but this was the saintly lady who was about to contribute fresh bread to his slide down the rainbow and into the pot of gold.

"'Cause the waves are already high and it's the first day of summer. The whole gang will be there. Damn, Ma, it's summer!"

Jessica laughed at the enthusiasm in her boy's voice. He was her pride and joy. The apple of her eye and the accumulation of all the good things in life that she herself had dreamed of but, as a girl, was never able to do. Her brief stint working in the pottery at the end of the last World War gave her a brief taste of freedom that she had never forgotten. Pregnancy ended that.

"Say, Ma. I really want to thank you for the offer to help. I swear, I would lay down and nap on a set of
railroad tracks for the chance to own that car."

Jessica reached over and patted her son's knee as she drove. "I know, sweetie. I wish I could do more. $300.00 is a lot of money. How do you plan on earning so much?"

Xander turned and looked out the passenger's side window. They were sailing down Tenth Street and turning the corner onto Ocean Drive. They were only blocks away from paradise and Xander could already smell the ocean and feel the familiar excitement as it settled in his body. Within minutes, he would be able to make out the coastline and the vast stretch of sparkling sand that preceded the wild Pacific. His heart surged. "Huh? Oh, no sweat. I'll hit the pavement first thing Monday morning and have me a cherry job by afternoon. THERE! Pull off over there. See, the gang is already here."

Jessica quickly slammed her slippered foot on the brake as Xander was already jumping from the car. Before she could scold him for his recklessness, he was out and unhooking the bungee straps that held
his precious surfboard on the top of her Ford Fairlane. With practiced ease, he tucked it under his arm and he started off towards his world as his mother shouted after. "Xanny! Wait! How are you going to get home?"

Xander never slowed or turned around. He simply threw his hand in the air and shouted back. "It's groovy, Ma. I'll catch a wave and ride it home."

Jessica chuckled as she watched her prince. He moved with such confidence and strength that it amazed her, considering his role model. Tony was anything but. Before she drove back home she sat for just a moment more. She watched him reach the group and saw the others jump to their feet and surround him in warmth and affection. Jessica's smile faltered slightly when she noticed Cordelia latch onto him.

It wasn't that she didn't like the girl, the problem was hormonal. Her Xanny was a virile young man and Cordelia was an available young girl. A powder keg combination. Xander had a full scholarship to
college and a ticket out of Sunnydale. All he needed to do was accept it. A pregnant girlfriend and a teenaged marriage was a family tradition she did NOT want passed on. With a sigh, Jessica finally threw the car into first gear, eased back out onto the street and drove away.

"XAN!"

The cry rose up from the adoring crowd as he approached. Xander grinned, gripped his board a bit tighter and increased his gait to a trot. Although barely 7 AM, the sand beneath his feet was already warm. His flip flops slapped against his feet and the grit wedged uncomfortably beneath his toes. Like everything else about the beach, he loved it!

Running to meet him, Buffy and Willow squealed on one side of him as Cordelia possessively linked her arm through his. Together the procession moved to the area of blankets, water jugs and bags of chips that identified their ownership of the small section of Whitewater Beach. Flipping it up on end, Xander swiftly shoved his board into the sand where it
stood upright and proud waiting for his first ride of the season.

Xander flopped down onto the blanket. He stretched his legs out in front and he rested back on his elbows as he looked out onto the horizon to evaluate the rise and fall of the waves as they raced to shore. To the left, they crashed and exploded in a salty spray over the end of the pier where the old men fished. To the right and straight ahead they grew and swelled till finally falling and rolling to the beach with a frothy foam.

And they roared. The thunderous voice of the mighty Pacific Ocean shouted at them nonstop reminding them who was master, who was king. When he was a child, Xander used to imagine it was the voice of Poseidon himself calling to Xander, coaxing him to join the god to live beneath the waves and rule beside him.

Xander tipped his head back and he closed his eyes. And he was home.
"Hey, sleepy head. You're not going to snooze away the day are you?"

Xander opened his eyes and looked up into the pouty and somewhat annoying face of his steady girlfriend. Cordelia. She was hot. There was no denying it. She was a stone fox. She was last year's Homecoming Queen and would, no doubt, retain the crown their senior year. She was ready, willing and, if given the come-on, able to go all the way. So why didn't he want to? Why did his pecker respond to his hand yet not give even a nod of its head to her? What could he possibly want in a girl that she didn't have?

"Wha? Oh, nah, just feeling the sun on my face. Its gonna be a scorcher today. So, where's the rest of the gang?"

Buffy adjusted her bikini and wondered why if the bottom fit right, the top was always too big. She wished she had the nerve to buy a set of those falsies she had seen in the Frederick's of Hollywood catalog. "Oh, Oz said he was going to sleep in this
morning but he would be here later and Riley is already out there."

Xander sat bolt upright and squinted against the glare of the sun. He stared in the direction that Buffy indicated and, for a moment he thought she was joking. Then he saw it. One lone figure that rose with the swelling wave. He watched as the boy turned the nose of his board toward the hump of water, bending and twisting expertly as he skimmed over and through the rolling wave.

With a whoop and a shout, Xander leapt to his feet. He tugged his board from the sand and he darted off, kicking the thongs from his feet as he charged toward the water. In seconds, the sand beneath his feet turned wet as the tide rushed in, splashing around his ankles before retreating again.

He never slowed or paused. When the height of the water reached his knees, Xander aimed the board straight out at his side. Using the muscular strength of his legs, he launched himself forward and landed prone on his stomach onto the waxed, polished
board. Then, he began to paddle.

His arms strained against the direction of the water as he pushed his body further and further from the shore pausing only intermittently as he gripped tightly to the sides of the board, balancing as a small rogue wave washed under him in an attempt to dislodge him. He laughed as the salt sprayed in his face and he shook his head causing his wet shaggy hair to flop in and out of his eyes.

Finally, he reached his destination. A spot far enough from the shore to be effective. He skillfully turned his board and he swung himself around. Throwing his leg over, he raised himself into a sitting position, and there he floated. He looked back at the tiny people on the beach. He could hardly distinguish one from another. Buffy could have been Willow, Willow could have been Lucille Ball. It didn't matter. He watched as Riley slid into shore and onto the sand before blending in with the others.

The hot breeze blew across Xander's body and the
only sounds in the nearly silent world were the screams of the sea gulls and the roar of the ocean. There was no time and space for him beyond the here and now and he floated on the cusp. He wanted to stay here forever. He never wanted to graduate. He did not look forward to his eighteenth birthday next month and he could not even consider a college that took him away from all this. The future held no thrill for him that surpassed this.

Soon, however, his moment of contemplation drew to a close as he instinctively felt the rush of a swell at his back. With a quick glance of confirmation over his shoulder, he again shifted his position. He dropped onto his stomach on his board and he frantically paddled his arms through the water as he felt himself begin to rise.

When the power of the ocean lifted his board higher, he grabbed the sides and hoisted himself to his feet. Every part of his body knew its job. It came as naturally to him as breathing.

Bent at the waist, Xander's arms shot out as his feet
constantly shifted forward and back in a well-executed show of skill and balance. Like a tightrope walker, Xander read and responded to the jerking, erratic movement of the huge wash beneath him. The salt water splashed him, threatening to dislodge and drown him, but he only scoffed at the Pacific's attempt to overtake him.

His face was a serious study of concentration while his heart pattered with the joy that filled his soul. He felt like he was flying. Nothing in life rivaled the sensation of mastering and riding the power of the ocean. Xander couldn't imagine anything greater.

Leaning forward to retain his balance, Xander's legs strained and his toes flexed in an attempt to hang on as the force of the water drove him high and in toward the inevitability of the shore. He ducked and he wove from side to side while his feet stepped forward and back, walking the heavy board until gradually the height and strength of the wave lessened and he finally coasted onto the sandy beach.
"WOO HOO!!"

Xander knew it was going to be a hell of a summer.

Part Four

"Hey! Let me help! Can I help? I can carry those. See it isn't......oops. Sorry. Wait, maybe...."

"Mr. Giles!"

The deep, baritone voice of the burly mover boomed out, echoing through the half-empty house. In response, Rupert Giles' head popped out of the room he was trying, despite the repeated disruptions, to set up as his library and study. He didn't have to inquire as to the reason for the break in his concentration.

"WILLIAM!"
Immediately, the small, pale, blue-eyed boy popped around the corner like a happy, eager puppy. The effervescence in his movement and the bounce in his step never wavered. It only shifted gears.

"Yes, Da?"

Rupert looked at the boy. Small for his age, he was the spitting image of his mother. A woman worshiped and beloved even after her passing from the cruelty of the cancer that had invaded and ravaged her delicate body. Sometimes the likeness was too painful. Sometimes Rupert needed to turn away and too often he held himself aloof emotionally from the boy. Yet it never seemed to break the boy's spirit.

"William. Leave the movers alone to do their job. The university was kind enough to secure this house and to make arrangements to have our things transported here and it would not be proper for you to interfere with them. If you really need something to do, why don't you come in here and help me
unpack these books. Each one needs to be wiped down and placed in it's designated order on the shelves of.... I say, William please do stop making that face."

William stood with his nose wrinkled up, his tongue lolled out the side of his mouth and his eyes grotesquely crossed. He couldn't imagine any torture on earth that would be more painful than being trapped in that small room buried under a mountain of dusty old books. In response, Rupert heaved a sigh of exasperation.

"Fine. Then why don't you go outside and see if there are any other boys in the neighborhood for you to play with. Keep in mind that we are strangers here in the new world and not everyone is as gregarious as you are. You really must learn some restraint and self-control, William."

The young boy danced around in a restless circle contradicting his father's unreasonable expectations. "Geez Louise, Da. I'm seventeen years old. I don't go out and play anymore and besides,
you're the one people are going to look at sideways if you go around saying stuff like "the new world." Just cause you're a professor of history and anthropology doesn't mean you have to be a stuffed shirt. This is Cala-for-ni-a! This is halfway around the universe from that gloomy old flat in London. This is the land of sunshine and sand and oranges and...oh, wait, I think that might be Florida. Maybe California is strawberries or pineapples. Anyway, this is the best thing that ever happened to us."

Rupert Giles placed the book he had removed from the crate back on the stack and he leaned up against his new, polished desk, giving his son his full attention. "Sit down for a moment, Will."

William could feel the skin on his back jumping and twitching like a cat and he itched to get outside. He was dying to just run, to feel his muscles burn off the excess energy that always flooded his brain and body. Yet, he could see the intensity in his father's face so he did as he was told, the compromise being that his feet and legs swung back and forth, inches
from the floor, nonstop. Rupert clasped his hands and leaned forward.

"William, I am not a demonstrative man but that doesn't diminish my affection for you. You are right, California is halfway around the universe from where we were and, in many ways, that concerns me. Your final year of school before university will be in Sunnydale High School. You must understand that an American public school is a far cry from the private boys' academies that you are accustomed to. That is why we came early. I had hoped you would become familiar with the area and the inhabitants before the beginning of the academic year. What I am trying to say, William, is that I don't wish to see you hurt. I understand that boys here can be a bit bullish and you are...well, like your mother, you are small for your age. I couldn't stand it if anything...."

Rupert dropped his gaze when the sting of the unshed tears threatened to give him an appearance of vulnerability. Quickly, William hopped off the box he had been perched on and he went to his father,
throwing his arm around the older man's shoulders. Although his mother had died when he was very young, he knew for his father the wound was still very raw and painful. It was no doubt the reason his father had accepted the offered professorship, hoping for a fresh start.

"It's going to be all right, Da. We are going to be all right. This is a great job for you and a brand new place for me. The guys here might be a little different, but hey, I can fit right in. You just wait and see."

Giles looked into the hopeful, trusting eyes of his son and, thankfully, before the moment could become choked and uncomfortably laden with emotion, one of the movers dropped something heavy, breaking the spell and requiring immediate attention.

Rupert stood straight up and smoothed the nonexistent wrinkles from his shirt. He was, again, every bit the stuffy professor. It was a persona he was much more comfortable wearing as his face
took on a stern expression. "Oh, dear. I just know that crash can't be anything good. I'm sorry, William, but I'm going to have to see to them or we shall have nothing left but a pile of broken furniture."

William grinned. He knew his father loved him but the worry was misplaced. From the moment Giles had first informed him of this move, William had done his homework. He had researched the geology as well as the sociological habits of the juvenile residents of this locale and he was ready. He would blend right in. Although he hadn't really minded the nickname of 'Bug' that had been stuck on him back home, he would be his own man here.

And he was anxious to get started. He was nearly giddy when he realized his new home was less than a mile from the coastline and he couldn't wait to see it. According to all the teen movies, the beach was where it was at. It was where Annette and Frankie always met and fell in love. With a bit of luck, there would be a Frankie or two left over for him.
"Da. I'm going to get my bicycle off the moving truck and go for a ride, OK?"

Giles was pointing and chastising a large, sweaty man who was generally disinterested in the directions of the Englishman. Because of that unprofessionalism, Giles was again absorbed in the intricacies of the transport of their belongings as he tried in vain to interject some reason in the placement of the crates they were hauling in.

"Please, gentlemen, if you would. The boxes are clearly identified on the sides. The crates marked 'Kitchen' should be taken directly to the kitchen. Why on earth would you place them in the bathroom? We do not cook in the....what? Oh, yes of course, William, but please don't go far from the house. It would not do at all for you to become disoriented in an area that....William! Please do NOT make that face. Stop! No, do not carry that box of bed linens into the...."

William chuckled at his father's exasperation and
quickly took advantage of the diversion. He darted from the large house and rushed to the moving van. He zipped up the ramp and into the back where he hopped on his new bicycle before riding it down the incline and coasting off down the street. Keeping his father's admonishment in mind, he did take note of the house number and street name. 6969 Compton Drive. Easy enough to remember.

So, this was Southern California.

The weather was amazing. The sky was cloudless and a deep, rich blue, the likes of which he had never seen overhead in London. The sun was blazing and the constant breeze that drifted over him was hot and left a peculiar, salty taste on his lips. With his face lifted up, he rode on, ignoring the small dog that yapped angrily as he passed and cheerfully raising his hand in response to the old woman in her garden who smiled at him.

He had studied the city map a hundred times. He had circled the location of their new address and even before arriving here, he had traveled the line
in his mind that would take him directly to the beach. He knew it by heart. Two blocks north, turn left and proceed straight. There he would find it. The Pacific Ocean. He couldn't miss it.

His legs pumped the pedals rapidly and propelled him in the direction of the end of the last block that would transform the street from eclectic, residential homes to a dead end area of cement for parking. When he finally arrived, he slammed his feet backwards, locking up the bike's brakes and skidding sideways to a stop.

"Oh, holy shit!"

William stood frozen as he stared out over the most amazing landscape he had ever seen. It was more magnificent than he had imagined. It was greater than any of the pictures he had looked up in the library. It was simply incredible!

The beach stretched as far as he could see in both directions. It was sand that sparkled like diamonds in the sun. Dotted with colorful blankets and
umbrellas, families and groups of shouting people romped, played and lounged at the shoreline of what could only be described as the edge of the world. The grand Pacific. The Ocean. William was humbled. For the first time in his life, he really did feel small.

And then he snapped out of it. "Step the fuck out of the way, Annette. I'm comin' for Frankie."

William shoved off with his foot and his bicycle was again on the move. He aimed it for the long pier and he was jostled as his rubber tires hit the wooden planks.


He intended to ride out as far out as he could to get a better look.
"Xander sure is lookin' badass these days."

Cordelia and Willow looked into the glare of the blazing sunlight toward the ocean to watch Xander stand on his yellow, polished board and begin another ride, skimming across the surface of the water toward the waiting shore. As the three girls casually observed him, Buffy continued her assessment of his physique. "Yep, he's all pumped up and sharp as a tack."

Cordelia nodded and returned to her issue of Teen Scene magazine and the article on Bobby Darren and Sandra Dee. "Yeah, he's a stud."

Buffy and Willow shared a glance over Cordelia's shoulder and Willow gave a slight nod of her head at which time Buffy then asked, "So, you two doin' it or what?"
Cordelia bristled but tried to stay calm. She exuded an air of near boredom as she considered her answer. Buffy was like a bulldog. Once she got something in her jaw and started chewing on it, she would not let go and from the look of rapt attention on Willow's face, Cordelia knew this was a planned assault. She tried the old duck, dodge and diversion first.

"Gee, Buff, that's kind of personal. I mean I would never ask how far you and Riley have gone."

Buffy immediately sat upright, legs crossed and feet tucked under. She tugged at her bikini top to keep it firmly in place and she got down to business.

"He's allowed to touch the boobies under the shirt but over the bra. He can french if he has brushed his teeth. AND if we go out and he spends more than ten dollars on the date, he can reach in my jeans and touch my hoo hoo over the panties. So, give."

Willow's eyes bugged and her hands were slapped
over her mouth in stunned silence at Buffy's loose morals and advanced experience. Now she was more anxious than ever to hear what Cordelia had done. Cordelia wasted no time in her rebuttal.

"I most certainly have NOT done IT. I plan on wearing white on my wedding day and you know if you aren't a virgin, you're not allowed to wear a white gown and then the whole world knows you're a slut."

Willow shrugged. "It's true. I've seen the picture of the dress she picked out from the Bride's magazine and it sure the hell is white."

Buffy's eyes narrowed to evil slits. She had no intention of letting the subject drop that easily. She crossed her arms over her nearly flat chest and she let it be known that she was a very patient inquisitor.

Cordelia felt like a trapped bunny under the intent stare. There was no doubt that she would have to lie. If she told the truth that after a year, they
hadn't done more than kiss with a side of minor groping, the girls would wonder what was wrong. Cordelia herself had wondered what was wrong with her that Xander didn't try more.

Now, the only question was how far to go with that lie. It was a thin line between experienced and skank and a girl's reputation was critical. As the pause dragged on, Buffy's brow crinkled into a frown. If Cordy thought she was going to wriggle out of this, she was very much mistaken, so Buffy tried again.

"Tell you what. I'll ask a question and if you don't say 'no' then we'll figure it's a yes."

Willow nodded. It was brilliant. No one could drag and badger a person like Buffy. Willow knew that from being on the receiving end of Buffy's haranguing. Cordelia knew it too. Reluctantly she laid down her magazine and she faced the other two. It was best just to get this over with.

"Fine."
"OK. Has he touched your titties? Skin on skin and inside the bra?"

When they got no answer, Buffy and Willow squiggled their butts in the sand and they giggled at the implied affirmative. Buffy went on.

"Kissed a nipple?" No response. Willow covered her face with her hands in nervous excitement and Buffy went for the big guns. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Does he make you put your hand on it? Did he ever whip it out? Have you seen it? Oh, my God! What does it look like?"

Cordelia's one weakness had always been that she adored being in the spotlight. It was the reason she spent all her allowance on the newest jeans and sunglasses. It was why she lost weight when she used her lunch money to buy the albums no one else could afford. It was why, even now, she knew she was about to do something really stupid. Quickly, before answering, she glanced up to assure herself that Xander wasn't within earshot and she
clutched her knees to her chest.

"You want to know what it looks like?"

Buffy gasped. She never dreamed that Cordy would really answer something so intimate. She and Willow moved in even closer until their three heads were nearly touching. Finally, Cordelia batted her eyes demurely and she answered the question with a question.

"Do you want to know what it looks like when it is soft or when......."

Immediately, all three girls clasped their hands together and they let out an ear-piercing squeal that caught the attention of all the other beach-goers in the area before they fell onto their beach towels and rolled around laughing.

~*~*~*~*~

William leaned out over the railing at the end of the
pier. He had parked his bicycle against the side and walked to the furthest point to look as far into the vast, expansive ocean as he could. It was incredible. It was so much more than any of the pictures of it that he had looked up in the school library.

He spoke with an old man who told him he had come here to fish every day for the past fifty years. To William, that seemed reasonable. He would never tire of this view no matter how often he came here. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back, feeling the heat of the sun on his skin and tasting an odd salty grit on his lips.

The wind blew a constant warm breeze through his hair and ruffled his cotton, button shirt, ballooning it away from his chest. The sounds were an odd combination. It was the distant music from a dozen transistor radios, the squawking seagulls as they swooped down to snag the small fish in the shallow waters under the pier, and the roar of the waves as they rolled to shore.

William felt at peace. The constant restlessness
within him was quiet. The flaring energy that kept him in perpetual motion had ceased and he felt like he had come home. Slowly, he took in a deep breath and he blew it back out. Then, just as he was about to turn back to the old man, William's attention was drawn off to the left where a group of girls was screaming and acting strangely.

From what William had seen, girls often acted strangely. Not that he had had a lot of experience with girls. He had spent the last ten years attending McDuff's, an all-boys school in London. He liked boys much better than girls. He liked boys a great deal. Still, the girl's behavior seemed peculiar even for females so he continued to observe. Finally, one of them pointed out towards the ocean and William followed her line of sight.

At first he saw nothing. Nothing beyond the froth and foam of the waves that rose and fell, tumbling toward the shore. And then he looked again. Closer. And what he saw stunned him. It was a man. Perhaps a boy. He stood, crouched and balanced on a board as he sailed like he was flying, gracefully,
skimming across the surface of the water.

He ducked and dodged the waves expertly as they washed over him, trying to dislodge him, and he traveled at a speed too fast for William to estimate.

"Holy shit!"

The old man behind him chuckled as he stuck another wiggling, struggling worm onto his hook.

"That's surfin', boy. You ain't never seen nobody surf before? Them kids come here nigh onto every day in the summertime just to ride the waves and bake in the sun till they is dark as negroes. You gonna try that surfin' stuff?"

William held his hand over his eyes to shield against the painful glare of the sun off the water and he watched as the board rose and fell with the swell until it finally coasted toward the shore where the boy simply jumped off to the side as it slid onto the sand.
"Wow! I've seen it in the movies, but it always looked so fake, like the actors were standing on a table while somebody threw water on them. But this. Bloody hell! That is like dancing. I'll just die if I can't learn to do that. I swear, I'll just die."

The old man grinned as he looked into the young boy's blue eyes and he decided that, yes, the boy might just die if he couldn't surf.

**Part Six**

The high-octane energy that coursed through his veins was recharged and William was again on the move. He tossed a fast, "See ya," toward the old fisherman and he hopped back on his bike, pedaling across the uneven wooden planks of the long pier.

When he arrived at the paved parking area, he stopped. Realizing he couldn't maneuver the bike across sand, Will shoved it into one of the bike slots and he took a moment to reestablish his whereabouts.

His overwhelming drive had but one focus. He
wanted to surf. He wanted to learn how to sail above the waves and walk on the water like Jesus himself did. Not that Will thought Jesus was a surfer, but he might have been. Clad in his long dress with his beard flowing in the wind, snatching fish from the waters as he went. Yeah, Jesus could have been a boondoggie. The comparison made perfect sense.

But the point was, William wanted to surf. The only question was, how. He needed a starting point and since Jesus wasn't on his board today, the boy in the water would be the next-best thing.

Will stood at the edge of the concrete and shielded his eyes from the sun. He scanned the seascape in search of the figure he had seen, but now all that was visible were the waves. No matter. The screaming bints acted as though they knew him. Will resolved to begin with them.

"Oh, man! Bitchin' waves! Did you see me shoot that curl? This is gonna be the best summer ever!"
Xander planted the end of his board in the sand so that it stood upright behind him before dropping down, wet and panting, onto the blanket with his girls. He shook the water from his hair, like a dog, and laughed as it flew over all of them. "Hey, Buff, where's Riley? Wasn't he here earlier?"

Buffy fiddled with her fingernails, picking at the chipped corners while Willow studied an imperfection on her Tweety Bird beach towel. Both girls knew if they looked at their friend right now all they would see was a vivid mental picture of Cordelia's insinuation of a hard, very intimate, body part. With a shrug, Buffy mumbled her answer.

"Oh, he had to leave already. His dad is making him work at the car garage this summer. He said he might be back later, after sundown."

Xander rubbed a towel briskly over his face and chest. "Damn. That's tough. At least my old man gave me the weekend before I have to go pound the pavement. I'm bummin' but I need the bread."
When no one answered him, he frowned slightly and wondered why the hell Buffy and Willow would not look at him.
"So, what's the what? You girls act like Howdy Doody died or something."

Before too much information could surface, Cordelia flipped open her cooler and handed him a bottle of Coke with a toothy smile and a flip of her hair. "Nope, no dead puppets today. Willow was just mourning the lack of homework. You know how she can be. And as for Buffy, she...."

"Hello! I say! That was truly magnificent!"

Xander's bottle stopped halfway to his lips and Cordelia's sentence died in mid-thought as all four friends looked upward to see a very pale, blond boy standing over them. He was very nearly vibrating with excitement and looked as though he may explode at any minute. The fact that he was dressed in long jeans, a button shirt and sand-caked tennis shoes was secondary on their what-the-fuck list.
Xander turned his upper body all the way around to look off to his left and then to his right before it became obvious that the boy was addressing him. "Oh, well, thanks. I think."

With that, the boy was dismissed. Xander finished his Coke and the girls turned their attention back to the magazine with the full-color pinup page of Troy Donahue. Buffy immediately began bartering, trying to determine what it would take to wheedle it away from Cordelia. Mentally, Xander shocked himself by wondering if the clerk down at the drugstore would think it odd if he slipped down and bought one for himself.

Will couldn't believe his luck. The very person he had been searching for was right here in all his wet, glistening glory. "Hellooo. Pardon, but would you mind terribly if I joined you?"

Without waiting for an answer, Will dropped down, sitting half on the corner of the blanket and half in the sand. He gave the group a quick initial
assessment. The girls could be all right. It remained to be seen. But the boy.... Oh sweet Jesus. He was even more incredible close up than he was at a distance.

Buffy sighed. She had seen this before. Minor fingerlings trying to insert themselves into the core group and become popular by the company they kept. She knew the only thing to do was to stop the infestation before it took root and grew.

"Bug out, pipsqueak. This is a private party."

The others winced slightly at Buffy's bluntness but understood it's necessity. Especially considering the question of the young boy's age. He appeared to be no more than thirteen or fourteen. Maybe Dawn's age. And that sort of intrusion into their tight-knit circle just couldn't be considered.

For William, a boy who had endured the cruelest of taunts, 'pipsqueak' was nearly a term of endearment. He scooted around and sat cross-legged as he threw his head back and barked out a
laugh that threw them all off guard.

"Pipsqueak. Ha! That's a good one. Actually, my name is William but you can call me Will. All my friends back home call me B...Will. We have just moved here and I am to start the fourth year in your school."

Willow tipped her head to the side as though she were trying to identify a strange sound that had joined the seagulls and ocean waves. "You have an accent. Where are you from?"

"London. We have only arrived today. My father has accepted...."

Cordelia clutched her Teen Scene magazine to her chest and she squealed. "EEEE! London? Like in England? Oh, God! Do you know the Beatles?"

"Well, actually no. We are from London and I believe they...."

Ignoring his attempts at an explanation, she flipped
around to face Buffy and Willow and the three of them all began babbling at once. Unfinished sentences ran together as each girl interjected random, rambling thoughts, comments, compliments, and criticisms while Xander drank another Coke and William's mouth fell open.

"I just LOVE Paul! He is too....."

"Are you kidding? JOHN is the one...."

"But Ringo's nose..."

"George, enk...."

"The hair....."

Feeling swept away with the excitement of the conversation, Will clapped his hands and dove in with his own contribution to the worship of the band. "Did you see those matching brown suits? I hear they are going to be on Ed Sullivan next week. I'll just die if we don't have an antenna up on the roof of the new house by then."
All three of the girls were shocked silent for about four seconds before Buffy spoke for them all.

"We should totally get together and watch at my house! Mom can get some Jiffy Pop and we can have a Beatles party!"

For the second time that morning, an ear splitting scream tore through the air and this time four bodies rolled around together on the beach blanket as Xander sat to the side with a look of complete disbelief and confusion on his face.

When the ecstasy ebbed, the celebrants sat back up and Buffy, as self-appointed lead took care of the introductions. Pointing at them one at a time, she made the sweep. "Hi. I'm Buffy, this is Willow, and the one with last season's Jackie Kennedy sunglasses is Cordelia. Oh, and that's Xander. What did you say your name was?"

William had smiled and nodded at each person as their name was given. When he turned to the water
god and the name 'Xander' rolled off Buffy's tongue like hot butter, Will feared he might faint dead away. Xander he thought. It fit him perfectly.

With his eyes locked on Xander's, Will leaned forward. He dropped onto his hands and knees and he reached out to shake hands. "How do you do, Xander?"

The girls giggled at Xander's flustered expression. Something about the young boy made him very uncomfortable but he just couldn't put a name to why. Without thinking, he extended his hand and wrapped his large, hot, calloused fingers around Will's small soft ones. Both boys blinked and the moment dragged on. Finally, Xander snapped out of it and jerked his hand back. "What the hell did you say your name was? And how the hell old are you anyway?"

William sat back on his butt. His heart pounded in his ears and breathing in the hot, humid air was becoming difficult. "William. And I'll have you know that I turned seventeen on my last anniversary."
Buffy tied her hair up in a ponytail, a move that helped her to think. "See, Xan? He's the same age as us, so chill. Now as for your name. William is a stuffy, London name. If you're gonna live in California, you need a swingin', hip name. Hum. Let me think. Buck? No. Speed? No. I got it! Spike! Yeah, you look like the big bully type."

Will and the girls all laughed at the very absurdity of the name but the fact was, Will loved it. It was acceptance. It was a start. Xander was less than enthusiastic. He simply shrugged and laid down to close his eyes and sun himself.

**Part Seven**

Giles stood in the center of the chaos and disorder that was attempting to be their new home. The movers had just left amidst a flurry of
disagreements over what constituted the completion of their appointed task and their departure was capped by having the gall to extend their sweaty palms in hopes of receiving remuneration on top of their contractual wage. Reluctantly, and with much lens polishing, Giles slapped a single dollar bill into each hand before slamming the door in their faces.

And now, he stood in the center of the living room and turned in a full circle. It was deplorable. None of the furniture had been placed where he had instructed and the boxes were stacked recklessly in every open space leaving only a single narrow walkway through and into the direction of the kitchen. He dreaded what awaited him in there.

It wasn't until then that he began to realize just how long it had been since his son had ridden off on his bicycle. With a small niggle of concern, Rupert walked out onto the front porch and stepped out to the sidewalk. He looked as far down as he could in each direction and was dismayed to see that there was no sign of the boy or his red Schwinn Flyer
anywhere.

"Hi. Welcome to the neighborhood."

Giles jumped straight in the air at the unexpected voice. He spun around to find himself face to face with a very attractive, dark-haired woman handing him a pie of some unknown fruitish persuasion. Quickly, he regained his composure. "Well. Yes, thank you. How very neighborly of you. I'm Rupert Giles and you are....?"

The young woman's face crinkled slightly as the genuine smile warmed her features in what he thought a most appealing manner. She shifted the pie to her left hand and she extended her right. "I'm your next door neighbor, Jenny Calendar. When I saw the truck arrive this morning I decided to do the hospitable thing and bake you a pie. OK, that's a lie. The truth is, I ran down to the market and bought it, but it is the thought that counts."

Giles had to laugh at the woman's blunt honesty. She was like a breath of fresh air and despite the
disorganized mess inside the house, he was beginning to think this could very well be a lovely place to settle in.

Waving the pie in enticing little circles under his nose, Jenny waggled her eyebrows. "Would you like to step over to my place for a cup of coffee and a piece of pie? It's rhubarb."

Rupert gazed longingly at both the fresh baked pie and the fresh-faced purveyor of the pastry. Although that sounded like a wonderful idea, he had other more pressing concerns at the moment. "That sounds absolutely delightful, Miss Calendar, however I seem to have misplaced my son. You didn't see a small, blond boy on a bicycle go by here earlier did you?"

The smile on Jenny's face sagged slightly. She knew it was too good to be true. An eligible man in a small town of divorced and spinstered women was as rare as lipstick on a polar bear. She had been watching out her dining room window all morning as the movers hauled things in and nothing looked
feminine. Damn. $3.00 wasted on a fucking pie. "Oh, sorry, no. Your wife must be very concerned about him."

Rupert removed his glasses and he began polishing them. Giving his hands a specific task helped keep his focus from becoming tearful whenever his wife was mentioned. "No. I'm ah....That is, my wife has.....I'm a widower."

Jenny's eyes lit up and she immediately looped her arm through his and began steering him toward the small, brown bungalow next door. It struck him that she was amazingly strong for a woman of her stature.

"Wow, I'm so sorry to hear that. Gosh it must be real hard. You know, starting fresh in a new country with a little boy to raise on your own. Well, don't you worry one more second cause I'm right here and I will give you a hand any old time you need. Now, why don't we go in and have some pie while we decide what to do about that missing boy of yours."
SLAM.

The door whooshed shut as Ruper Giles disappeared inside. His last thought before being whisked off the street was that he suddenly had an inkling of what a bug felt like just before it was consumed by a Venus flytrap.

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"I have to pee."

It was an auspicious statement that seemed to have a physical effect on every female bladder in the area. William, now known as Spike, was somewhat confused. The instant Buffy made her declaration, all three girls jumped to their feet and began an unspoken, mutually agreed upon trek across the sand to the ramshackle, wooden outhouse.

"Do they always pee together?"
Xander was still laying flat on his back on the beach blanket. His arm was over his eyes and it was unclear if he was asleep or awake. When Spike asked the question, Xander removed his arm, turned his head and seemed slightly surprised that the boy was still there.

"Yeah, they do. Toilet trips are a group activity for girls. Don't they do that where you come from?"

Spike hemmed and hawed, reluctant to admit that he actually had very little contact with females back in his hometown and certainly was not privy to their urination habits. In fact, he was startled to realize that this was the first time that he had ever actually spent time with girls and counted any as friends. Or potential friends. Before he could find a way to express any of that, Xander propped himself up on his elbows and squinted at the newcomer.

"Aren't you hot in all those clothes?"

Spike shrugged. He wanted to respond that he was nowhere near as hot as Xander but he knew a
statement like that could buy him a punch in the nose. "Yeah, sort of. I didn't really intend to come to the beach. I was just out riding my bike and...."

The corners of Xander's mouth twitched. "You're riding your bicycle?"

Spike blinked innocently. Xander sure was cute when he smiled. What was the question again? Oh, yes. "My bike, yes. Anyway, I was on the pier when I saw you surfing. Other than the cinema, I have never actually seen anyone surf before. It is incredible. It must be the most wonderful feeling in the world."

Xander sat up and crossed his legs. It was a move that caused his snug, short, swim trunks to bind and accentuate the wonderful bulge in the front. Spike tried his best not to stare at it. Xander seemed to be oblivious to his companion's interest as the chance to expound on the virtues of surfing presented itself.
"Oh, man, it's a gas! You're bookin' on the high-n-fly and just praying for the tubular to wrap you up inside it. Then when you shoot out the other end, man oh man, there ain't nothing that can beat it."

Spike's face took on a dreamy look as he listened to Xander. He didn't understand one single word of it but he knew with absolute certainty that that was what he wanted to do too. He wanted to feel that way about something. He wanted to be on top of the world and if he could be there with Xander, his life would be complete.

"I say, will you teach me? Please, Xander? Will you teach me how to surf?"

It was a down-to-earth question that snapped Xander's mind out of the clouds and jerked him back to reality. With a grunt of disgust, he flopped back down and closed his eyes again. "Nope. No can do. The Xanman here has to get a nine-to-five and earn some bread. I got my eye on some wheels and I only have the month to come up with the greenbacks to put down on her or I lose out. This
weekend will be my only parole before lockup Monday morning. If you ask around, you should be able to find somebody to...."

"No. No, I want you! I mean, it's just that you are so good and I want to learn from the best. Tell you what, I'll pay you. Yes, that's it. I'll hire you to teach me to surf. What do you say?"

Xander again sat up and he looked inquisitively at the small boy in front of him. For a few seconds, he considered the offer before he dismissed it. "Nah. It wouldn't work. I need three bills for my woody. That's a lot of paper."

Spike whimpered. He didn't know how much three bills was, but he was certain that Xander's woody would be worth every pound of it. His own dick agreed and twitched within the confines of his denims. "Straight English. How much?"

"Three hundred dollars."

It was a needle into the balloon of Spike's
enthusiasm. He had a good deal of money set back from gifts and allowances but nowhere near that much. Then, a possibility came to mind. A compromise that may suit them both.

"How about this. How about I buy one month of your time for one hundred of your American dollars. That is one third of the summer and one third of what you need. After that, you are still free to seek other employment in order to secure the balance."

Xander straightened his slumped shoulders while he stared into the pale, small face and tried to gauge the validity of the proposition. Was it possible? Could he actually have the best of both worlds? It would give him thirty days more of surfing while he collected enough money to keep Rory on the hook. In exchange, all he had to do was waste a few minutes each day going through the motions of teaching this boy to surf.

"Tell you what. You meet me here tomorrow and show me the color of your money. If it is as green as
you say, we got a deal."

Spike let out an odd little squeak as the grin took over his face. He immediately leapt to his feet and brushed the sand from the seat of his pants. "It's a deal! Splendid! I shall meet you here as instructed and we shall begin posthaste. Thank you. Thank you, Xander. You shall see. I will be an apt pupil. Till then. TTFN, as you Americans say."

Xander laughed and watched as the boy did his best to run through the sand in his bulky tennis shoes. Who the hell says TTFN?

He then laid back down, placed his arm over his eyes and thought no more about his new student.

Part Eight
The three girls stood outside the small shack. The inside was sectioned off into four stalls, each one containing a wooden seat with a round hole cut out of the center. It was creepy, deplorable and smelled like a mountain of elephant poo.

Buffy huffed. She looked at Willow on her right and Cordelia on her left. "Are you ready to do this?"

The other two held back with pained expressions before nodding to the affirmative. Buffy held their hands as they steeled themselves and she began to count.

"OK, one. Two. THREE!"

Then, in a well-practiced move, the girls sucked in a deep gulp of oxygen, held it in their lungs and rushed inside. They ran, each to one of the holes, dropped their swim suit bottoms and, without sitting down, watered the garden. When done, they wiped, jerked up and dashed outside where they expelled the breath they had held and they gasped for more. Their faces were pink from the effort and
their lungs burned.

Together, they then went into a twitching, flailing dance that graphically reflected the revulsion they felt for having to use the disgusting, foul facilities. When the shudders eased and they were calm, Buffy took a step back toward the beach but this time, Willow did not follow. Instead, she was looking off in the opposite direction. Away from the sand and surf.

"Willow?"

"You guys go ahead. It's almost noon and there still isn't any sign of Oz. I think I'm gonna see if he is...."

Cordelia grabbed Willow's arm and tried to pull her back. "NO! Come on Wil, you can't go there alone and we don't want to."

Willow looked at Buffy to see which side of the fence she would stand on, although she already had a pretty good idea. Willow knew a dark secret about Buffy that not even Cordelia knew. Buffy gazed off
in the direction of the narrow worn path that led away from the public beach, through the field, and ended up in a marshy, wooded valley. In that valley was a small dilapidated cottage. Buffy dropped her head and she shrugged.

"Oz is our friend. Maybe we should just go take a look. It isn't very far."

Cordelia looked back onto the beach. She could see Xander sitting up talking to the newcomer. She wanted to go back and join him but it would be a terrible betrayal not to back up her girlfriends. Should she? Shouldn't she?

"Oh, damn. Fine. But just a quick look. We go see if he is there and then we go back to the beach. Deal?"

The other two squealed with nervous excitement and they all hooked arms. For some odd reason, the line, "lions and tigers and bears" repeatedly looped through Cordy's brain as three sets of flip flops hit the path.
They passed the time on the walk with a discussion of the new boy who seemed to have wormed his way in. With a flip of her dark hair, Cordelia posed the question first. "So, what do you think of Spike? He's, um, kind of ..."

"Feminine?"

The others looked at Willow, shocked that she would actually put a name to it. Buffy seemed to study on the concept for a moment before taking the point a step further. "You don't suppose he's....you know.....queer? A homo? A fairy?"

All three girls stopped dead in their tracks and shared a stunned look between them before Cordelia dismissed it with a wave of her hand. "Don't be silly. This is California. Those type of people don't live in California. I think they all live in New York and New Jersey."

The three then came to the joint conclusion that that was probably true and anyway, they all liked
him so he couldn't be 'that way,' and they hurried on towards their destination.

Buffy's estimation of the distance was correct. It wasn't far. In fact it took them less than ten minutes of brisk walking to leave the high grass and enter the clearing where the cottage stood. Cautiously they approached.

It was a weatherworn clapboard cottage. Small, and obviously intended to be no more than a seasonal cabin, it was thought to have been abandoned years ago. Now, for the past two years, its occupant had been a squatter. A true beach bum that wanted nothing more from life than a day in the sun and a night in the arms of a nameless bimbo.

He was famous, or infamous, among the students at Sunnydale High. Little was known about him personally, about his background or even his true age, although he was obviously older than them.

He survived by the generosity of the beach community and what he could steal. Also through
the lucrative buying and reselling of affordable, high quality Mexican weed. Although laid back, the resident of Gull Cottage was apparently a popular, much sought after businessman.

To the innocent, virginal girls, he appeared dangerously worldly and Buffy had a crush. Only Willow knew that one night at the end of last summer, after the Labor Day bonfire, Buffy had let him kiss her before she ran off.

"I don't think there is anyone here."

The girls stood outside the closed door. There was no sound coming from inside and there were no footsteps in the sand around the perimeter, leading them to believe that possibly the mysterious surf bum had moved on. Hesitantly, Buffy needed to be sure.

With the other two holding back, she stepped up on the precarious porch boards and turned the knob on the rickety door, cracking it open only an inch or two while she called out in a tenuous voice. "Hello?
Anyone here? Angel?"

In a rapid move that nearly caused Buffy to pee herself, the door was jerked from her hand and thrown wide open. There, she found herself face to face with the very inspiration of all her nights when, in the dark, her hand would slip beneath her blankets.

Buffy choked and the other girls took three steps backward. Finally, Buffy found her voice and she squeaked out one word. "Angel?"

The man in the cottage smiled a slow, lazy, lascivious grin as his eyes slid from the top of her head to the flip flops on her feet and back up again. His hair was spiked straight up and he sprouted a two-day growth of beard. He wore nothing but a pair of swim trunks and, while that was the common attire down on the beach, on him, here in the marsh, the look bordered on intimate and obscene.

Buffy waited for the recognition to spark in his eyes
as the memory of their romantic kiss flooded back to him. The moment dragged on and she was taken aback when the only thing reflected in his dark eyes was amusement.

"Well, well. Three little Goldilocks have come to see the big bad bear. And to what do I owe this honor?"

Buffy stuttered and sputtered as she backed up. Suddenly her bikini felt way too small and her butt much too big. When it was clear that the power of speech was no longer one of Buffy's abilities, Willow stepped up. She put on a front of false bravado and announced the reason for their arrival.

"Is Oz here?"

In response, Angel stepped back, bent at the waist and swept his arm in a wide arc that bid them enter, while the smug grin never left his face. "Bienvenue ladies. Welcome to my humble home."

Cautiously, the three girls held hands and stepped inside. The dim, stuffy interior was a sharp
contradiction to the bright, blinding sunlight outside and it took a moment for their eyes to adjust. When they did, they tried to subtly look around. It was a small area of just one stuffy room with a doorway that presumably led into a bedroom in the back.

There were empty beer cans everywhere. The only evidence of domesticity was a pan of dirty plates and a couple discarded pizza boxes. The smell in the air was thick, sweet and hung in a smoky cloud of illegality.

"Hey! Well look hoosh here. My bestest fuckin' friends in the whole fuckin' world."

All faces turned and the girls found what they had sought. Slouched in a corner of the room, lounging in a beanbag on the floor, was Oz. His hooded eyes couldn't conceal the fact that his pupils were blown wide and his slurred speech and lolling head told them all they needed to know. Oz was stoned. Again.

With fear and caution now replaced by anger,
Willow and Cordelia marched over and each one grabbed an arm as they roughly jerked him to his feet. Buffy stood back and watched. She was having a hard time pulling her attention away from the bare chest and strong, hairy legs of their host.

With little assistance from Oz, the two girls heaved, grunted and hauled him out and into the harsh reality of the sunlight where he stumbled and blinked repeatedly.

"Damn. It's fucking blinding out here."

Willow felt no sympathy and for the hundredth time wondered why they bothered to try and save him from himself. Oh, yeah, because it was Oz.

"Shut up Oz, and walk! I swear, one of these days we are going to kick your ass!"

Buffy stepped off the porch to follow but at the last minute stopped and looked back. Angel was standing, leaning against the door frame. His arms were crossed and he still wore that insufferable
smirk on his face. When her eyes met his, he blew her a kiss.

"Come back anytime, Sugar. I'm always here."

Buffy turned and ran to catch up to her friends.

Part Nine

Xander sat up, cross-legged on the beach blanket, and watched the retreating back of the young boy as he walked away. He was an odd little bug, Xander thought, but then maybe that's how everyone was in London.

When his hand drifted to his lap, Xander was surprised and a bit embarrassed to find himself half hard and aroused. In searching for the source, Xander decided that it must be his unadulterated joy over the fact that it was the first day of summer
and the waves were bitchin'.

Squinting off in the direction of the outhouses, Xander saw no sign of the girls and imagined they had run into other schoolmates or, God forbid, they'd found a mirror which would mean they would be gone for hours while they fucked with each others hair. Xander was delighted. It meant free time which he did not intend to squander.

Recognizing the opportunity of it, he jumped to his feet, retrieved his precious board and he headed for the welcoming arms of the wild ocean.

~*~*~*~*~

"DA! Da, hey where are you?"

The young, breathless boy had burst through the front door like a blond cyclone. He stood facing the dozens of stacked boxes and he turned in a full circle, knowing his father could easily be hidden in the mountain of unpacked belongings. Just as he
was beginning to wonder if the older man had been lost in an avalanche of cardboard, the kitchen door swung open and Rupert's head popped out.

Immediately, William was flooded with guilt for leaving his only parent with all the work, which must have been significant considering his father's frazzled and rumpled condition. His thinning, slightly gray hair was mussed and sticking up on both sides like the horns of a great, mythological monster and as his Da rushed toward him, the words, 'Release the kracken!' popped to William's mind.

Internally, Will giggled at the funny sight. Outwardly, he clamped down on the humor that he could tell his father would not share.

"William! Where have you been? I have been most concerned. We are new to this area and I have not yet ascertained its safety. I was all but ready to call the authorities out to search for you. From now on I must know where you are at all...."
"I'm sorry, Da, but it was magnificent! I went to the beach. It is very near here and I met some of the most wonderful people. Californians are extraordinarily friendly. They have invited me to join them and they even gave me my very own American name. They called me Spike. So that's it, Da. From now on I shall be called Spike rather than William."

Giles' nose wrinkled in confusion at his boy who seemed actually proud to have been labeled with the bizarre moniker of 'Spike'. He had been forewarned that American teenagers were a culture all to themselves.

"Spike? What in God's name is a Spike? Really, William, I have always taught you that we must maintain a certain decorum and restraint when it comes to acquainting ourselves with new people, especially in an environment as foreign as...."

Spike cocked his head to the side and really gave serious contemplation to what he was seeing. Meanwhile, his father's lips continued to move and
the blah blah blah skipped over Spike's head like a flat stone on the surface of a frog pond. "Say, Da, what is that on your face?"

Rupert's eyes bugged and his thin lips stopped in mid rant as his hand snapped up to feel for the evidence that was apparently smeared all over him.

"Rhubarb! It's rhubarb. The very neighborly neighbor, Miss Calendar, from next door graciously baked us a pie and she...."

Spike leaned closer, squinted and studied his obviously flustered father. The red smears on his cheek, forehead and neck could possibly be rhubarb but they were oddly lip shaped. It was something he felt compelled to point out as his small, feminine forefinger snaked out and pointed in a wiggling manner toward Rupert's guilty expression. "Gee Da, they look like...."

"RHUBARB, William! Now stop nattering about. We have a great deal to do if we want to be able to sleep in this house tonight! We can discuss your
errant wanderings later, but right now I want you upstairs. Put your bedroom and the main bathroom in functional order while I work down here. Go. Go now."

Rupert watched as his son shrugged, turned, and darted up the stairs. As soon as the boy was out of sight, the older man snatched his handkerchief from his pocket and he began roughly scrubbing it over his face in an attempt to remove all evidence of this afternoon's shocking tryst. He then hurried back in to resume his duties in the kitchen while a small smile threatened the corners of his lips as he muttered, "Welcome Wagon, indeed."

William shoved open the door and strolled into his new bedroom. The movers had brought in the wooden bed frame and tossed the mattress on it. They had set his dresser in and the boxes that were labeled as his. From there it was up to him to make the space his own.

Immediately, he flopped down on his unmade bed and he put his hands behind his head. He looked all
around him as he thought back on this afternoon. California might be all right after all. He looked at the odd purple hue of the walls and wondered if his father would allow him to paint the room pink or possibly hang flowered wallpaper.

And posters! He wanted tons of posters hanging on every inch of wall space. Posters of the ocean, of surfers, of white waves and of sandy beaches. He might get one or two of the Beatles in honor of his new friends, and of course his favorite Frankie Avalon poster that he had brought with him would have a place of honor where he could easily see it while he laid in bed. It was a favorite sight when his hand slipped beneath the blankets.

When he thought of Frankie, he thought of the dark-haired boy he had employed to teach him to surf. William grinned like a loon. Xander. William decided he wouldn't mind a large glossy poster of Xander to hang on his wall.

"WILLIAM? Are you unpacking?"
William made no move to get up in response to his father's voice. Instead, he sighed and called back as he continued to daydream. "Yes, Da."

Then suddenly, though his father's commands couldn't pry him from his repose, a new thought had him sitting straight up before leaping from the bare mattress. Quickly, he ran to the stack of cardboard boxes marked, 'Will' and he began popping open the lids as he frantically dug through them looking for something critical.

When he spotted it, he let out a great breath of relief and he returned to the bed with the item reverently carried in both hands. Kneeling at the side, Will set the tattered cigar box on the edge of the mattress and he opened the lid.

It was all his worldly wealth. It was money he had saved from birthdays, allowances, tutoring jobs and gifts for the past countless years. It was a fortune. It had been converted into American currency just before leaving England and the lady at the exchange had told him it amounted to $123.46. Dollars. She
had called it dollars rather than pounds and he would remember to do the same.

He laid it out and recounted it. He had impulsively offered the handsome boy $100.00 to teach him to surf. That would all but wipe him out. Still, Spike found he couldn't care. It was the chance to learn to surf. To sail effortlessly across the surface of the ocean with the wind and salt water in his hair. It was a bargain at any price and it certainly didn't hurt that his instructor would be the very handsome and muscular surf-god known as Xander.

But now, first things first. In order to ensure that his father would not be a stumbling block in his path to surfmanship, Spike would have to be cooperative, pleasant, and feign interest in what the college professor had to say. It was a strain and a hardship, but Spike knew it was the only way. So, with his hands on his hips and a groan of disgust, he dove in to the boxes and began to assemble his bedroom.

"I say! Bloody well done! I must admit to a certain trepidation as I came to check on you, but I see that
my concerns were wholly unfounded. You have done an outstanding job, my boy. Simply outstanding!"

Rupert Giles stood at the head of the staircase and looked to the left into his son's room and then straight ahead and into the bathroom, both of which were clean as a whistle and ready for use. Spike snorted in exhaustion and slumped against the doorframe. It had taken him hours to complete the work and he was beginning to second-guess its value towards buying him his freedom. With each new unopened box he would grumble. "This better be fucking worth it."

In his heart, he knew it was.

Rupert Giles checked his pocket watch.

"Oh, good Lord! Look at the hour. We have been working far too long and I daresay we are both starved. I wonder if there isn't a casual eating establishment in this neighborhood where we could partake of a bite of supper. Possibly a pub of sorts."
Spike bounced on the balls of his feet, suddenly rejuvenated.

"Oh, oh, there is! I passed it on my way home. It is only a few blocks from here, down by the beach. It's called The Chatterbox. We can eat there!"

Part Ten

Rupert Giles and his son William, newly renamed Spike, stood outside the small brown-shingled building. There was a wooden walkway around the entire perimeter of the building and a large, red, fake crab perched on the railing that had a grotesque smile on its face and one claw raised to bid them welcome.

Above them, there was a huge black-lettered sign that arched the doorway which read, "The
Chatterbox." Both ends of the sign were accentuated with tilted musical notes. Rupert could not fathom the reasoning behind the name of the establishment and how it connected to the cheerful crustacean who apparently served as doorman.

"I don't believe this is a pub, Will. Are you certain they serve meals?"

Spike held himself back. He wanted to throw open the doors and rush inside. It was perfect. It was the sort of place that Gidget would go. It was American Bandstand and every other imported telly program that he had studied before coming to the States.

"Sure, I'm sure. I heard people talking about it on the beach today. Please, Da, let's give it a try. You said you were hungry, didn't you?"

Rupert polished the lenses of his glasses while he gave grave consideration to the situation. He really was nearly starved after having worked up a shameful appetite this afternoon, and there was not a morsel of food in the house. Without knowing the
other dining possibilities in the general vicinity, it would appear that they would be sampling the dubious cuisine of the Chatterbox Diner.

Before he could make the announcement of concession, they were startled by a squealing voice piercing the air directly behind them. "Hey! I thought that was you. Wow, what a small world."

When they both spun around, Spike could have sworn he heard a small, unmanly whimper escape from his father's lips.

"Hi there. I'm Jenny, your next door neighbor. You must be William. Well, aren't you a big boy. Rupe, shame on you. The way you talked, I thought Willy here was little more than a toddler but he's just a hop, skip and a jump from being grown."

Spike's left eyebrow arched dramatically. He was tempted to tell this annoying creature that the only Willy here was the monster one he kept in his skivvies but he feared that would lead to an extended, time-consuming argument. Instead, he
turned his insulted, confused scowl towards his father and he waited for an explanation that would dismiss this twitty woman and clear their path into the teen heaven that was the Chatterbox.

Rupert turned white as a sheet. He stuttered and sputtered as he attempted what he prayed was an innocent-sounding introduction. "Oh, yes, well, this, as she mentioned, is the neighborly Miss Calendar. Miss Calendar, this is William. William and I were just about to go in for a bite of supper, so if you will kindly excuse...."

Immediately, Jenny hooked her arm through Rupert's and she tugged him forcefully back, nearly causing him to lose his balance. Spike's eyes bugged wide at the familiarity she displayed. It was clear that this was the rhubarb lady and, apparently, here in the States the sharing of pie was considered a major step towards neighborly bonding.

"Don't be silly. You don't want to go in there. It's all teenagers. They play the jukebox too loud and they dance and they act foolish. Why don't you come
back to my place and I'll fix you a lovely sandwich with a leafy salad. Doesn't that sound yummy? Now, I know Willy doesn't want to spend time with us old folks, so be a good boy and give him five dollars. He can eat with his friends and we can get better acquainted."

The entire time Rupert fussed and frantically tried to think of a tangible excuse for bowing out, he was obediently digging into his wallet. The second the top of Lincoln's head appeared, Jenny snatched the bill out and shoved it towards Spike as she began dragging Rupert away.

The truth was, Spike could have kissed her. Ignoring the desperate expression on the older man's face, Spike held the money high over his head and he chuckled as his father disappeared down the street. "Don't fill up on pie!"

He then stuck the money in his pocket and shoved open the door. Instantly he was bombarded with the hustle and the bustle of youth and exuberance. Off to both the left and the right were large areas of
booths overflowing with trim, tan teens that all looked like they just stepped from an American movie.

Directly ahead was a soda fountain and a long counter with red plastic stools. Apron-wearing waitresses, all with massive beehive hairdo's containing long, yellow pencils that poked out, were running around delivering large trays of greasy meat sandwiches and mountains of fried potatoes. It smelled incredible! Spike stood, unmoving, grinning and trying to take it all in at once.

The music of the Rolling Stones shouting about getting no satisfaction boomed, threatening to blow out the windows while several girls bounced together, flailing their arms and doing what Spike recognized as something Dick Clark called the Watusi. He wondered if he could learn to dance like that. Probably not, considering he was still trying to master the twist.

"SPIKE! Hey, over here."
It took two beats for him to realize that he was the 'Spike' being summoned, but after locating the source, his face broke out into a wide grin as he recognized the redhead from the beach. Frantically, his brain scrambled for a name as he made his way through the throng of shouting, dancing bodies.

When he reached her booth near the back of the diner, he noticed that she was not alone. Sitting opposite her was a redheaded boy who slumped slightly with a crooked smile on his face and a lethargic demeanor. One by one he shoved chips into his mouth. His green eyes were hooded and he waved in slow motion.

"Hey, dude. So, you're Spike. Willow told me all about you. Said she met you while I was crashin' with Angel. Cool. I'm Oz. Sit, dude. Hang a while."

Spike didn't have to be asked twice. He slid in beside her, delighted that Oz had solved his dilemma by reminding him of her name. He looked around to see if the others were there but knew that even if they were, he may have trouble
spotting them in this crush of teen humanity.

"Yes, Willow and I are beach buddies. Are the others here? Buffy, Xander and um, the tall girl?"

Willow chuckled. It tickled her that Spike didn't use adjectives like 'pretty' or even 'cute' to describe Cordy. A point she would share with Buffy the first chance she could.

"Nah, Buff's on room-cleaning duty and Cordy and Xan are probably off somewhere, ah, being together."

Oz snorted and stuffed another french fry into his mouth. The munchies were a bitch.

"Of course you realize that 'being together' is Willow's delicate way of saying that they are boinking, heading to home base, doin' the dirty, bumping uglies, grinding goodies, slappin' sillies, rammin'...."

"OZ! I think Spike gets the point. Geesh! So, Spike,
you eating? They got some great burgers and dogs here. Oh! You should totally try the Elvis! It is to die for!"

Spike glanced around at the other plates of food being shoveled into the mouths of the teens around him and his stomach growled hungrily.

"The Elvis?"

Willow scooched around sideways in her seat so she could wave both hands dramatically as she described the scrumptious star of the Chatterbox menu.

"Well! It's a footlong hound-dog and it comes with a shake. Get it?"

Spike grabbed both her hands and waved them side to side as he squealed with her at the mental image of the King's hip gyrations. Oz watched silently with one eyebrow cocked slightly higher than the other. Before the other two could float back to earth, the chubby, middle-aged waitress shuffled over,
snatched the pencil from her beehive and whipped an order pad from her apron pocket.

"What'cha havin' Hon?"

Spike spun around, his butt still wiggling with excitement, and he grinned. "I would like to order one Elvis Platter please. And a side order of chips."

Laverne, the waitress, snapped her gum.

"It comes with fries."

"Fries?"

Oz held up a french fry before popping it into his mouth and Spike realized the translation. "Well then, slap some fries on Elvis and shimmy him on out here!"

Willow and Spike woo-hooed while Oz just snorted. This promised to be an interesting summer.

Part Eleven
The cartoony little car horn signaled the arrival of the VW Bug in his driveway and Xander leapt down the stairs, two at a time till he was three steps from the bottom. Then, as was his habit, he launched himself, sailed effortlessly out and landed with a resounding 'Thump' onto the wooden floor below.

He darted into the kitchen, kissed his haggard-looking mother on the top of the head and turned to rush toward the front door.

"Xander! Do you always have to come through here like a tornado?"

Xander paused at the kitchen door, grabbed an oatmeal cookie from the plate and laughed as he gobbled it down.
"Yup."

"Are you going to be out late?"

"Yup. See ya."

And he was gone. Jessica smiled and shook her
"How's that job hunt goin', boy?"

In response to the question, Xander slowed on his jaunt through the living room. Tony was planted in his usual spot in the prized La-Z-Boy. He had a baseball game on the television and a newspaper in his hand. It was a typical Saturday night in the Harris household.

"No sweat, Chet. I got a line on a temporary cash cow already. I'll check it out tomorrow and if it pans, I'll be hooked up for a third of the pork. If not, then cool, I'll hit the city sidewalks Monday and find me a payroll to add my John Hancock to. It's all good will, Bill."

Tony screwed his face up in total confusion and the newspaper in his hands crumpled into a wadded mess in his lap.

"What the fuck are you talking about, boy? Don't they teach you English in that fucking school of
yours? Lord knows they're quick enough to take my fucking tax dollars to pay for it. Speaking of school, what the hell do you intend to do about college? You know those school's don't hold them scholarships forever."

Xander laughed as he grabbed for the front door knob. "Sorry, Pop, can't think about all that right now. It's Saturday night and Cordy is waiting outside, but I'll tell ya what, I promise to think about college twice tomorrow to make up for it."

"Now, see here, young man...."

Right on time, the little car horn gave two more blasts and Xander jerked open the front door cutting off his father before the usual lecture could begin. "Sorry, Pops, but you know it ain't polite to keep a woman waiting."

Xander rushed out and closed the door, effectively cutting off the stream of sputtering expletives that he knew would still be there when this same
conversation resumed tomorrow. He hustled toward the little red Bug and he dropped into the small passenger's seat. Since the interior left no room for evasion or avoidance, he smiled patiently as she leaned over and planted a big kiss on his closed mouth. Happily, she then ground the gear-shifter into reverse and backed out onto the street.

"Hey, Baby. You're lookin' hot tonight."

Xander grinned at the compliment and knew he was required to respond in kind. It was precarious. He wanted to say something nice but not so nice as to be taken as encouragement. Like college, Xander just couldn't put his finger on his feelings for Cordelia. He loved her, no doubt, but somehow if felt more like an affection one would feel for a sister rather than a paramour. She was beautiful but, oddly, not a willy-hardener.

"Yeah, you're the moose's moustache too. Well, let's go. The gang will be waiting down at the Chatterbox and if we're late you know how Willow gets. Um, Cordy? I think you missed our turn."
Cordelia stomped her foot down. Putting the pedal to the metal, she forced the Bug to its shuddering, maximum speed of 50 MPH. At the same time, she glanced over at Xander with an evil leer. "We're going to make another stop first. I figured we would head up to Lookout Point to do a bit of submarine spotting." Xander tensioned up. An evening of awkward fumbling, sloppy kissing and pointless groping was NOT his idea of the perfect way to start the summer.

"Look, Cordy I don't think...."

"I'm ready, Xan."

Cordy's voice was quiet, whispery and conspiratorial. It landed on Xander's ears with a painful buzz and fell like a rock into his stomach. He didn't have to ask for clarification. He knew what she meant.

"We can't. I don't have any, you know, raincoats."
Cordelia's determination stayed firmly in place as she reached over and pushed the button that caused the tiny glove box to fall open smacking against his cramped knees. When it did, a small foil packet tumbled out obscenely and Xander immediately tossed it back in before it could scorch his skin.

"What the hell? Where did you get that? Oh my God! You didn't go down to Marlow's Drugstore and actually buy that...that...THING, did you?"

Cordelia giggled nervously. She kept her eyes on the road ahead and her hands gripped the wheel tightly as she tried to appear confident.

"No, silly. Gee whilikers. You know I wouldn't have set foot out the door before old man Marlow would have been on the phone to my mom. I got it from Sandy, my cousin. Her and Billy have been engaged forever and their wedding is still months away so they decided not to wait anymore and that's what they use. Sandy says it's foolproof and since you and I are almost engaged anyway...."
Xander turned his head and looked out the window as his life and happiness sped by. He was trapped like a rat on a sinking ship. In his heart, he had known this moment would come, he just preferred not to think about it. But now it was here. Staring him in the face like an evil vampire tapping at his bedroom window. Still, maybe it was for the best. It was bound to happen sooner or later. Maybe this way he could just grit his teeth and get it over with.

"Yeah, OK."

Cordelia was flushed with relief. Part of her had feared rejection and humiliation. In the past few weeks, she could swear Xander had been slipping away from her and she was terrified of losing him. This little endeavor was her insurance. Sandy had told her that once a man got a taste of 'IT,' he would be hooked like a fat bass on a sharp hook. Pussy was the infallible trapper. With a big grin, she turned onto the small, gravel access road that led to Lookout.
Forty minutes later, a rumpled, shamefaced Cordelia followed her angry, humiliated boyfriend through the door of the Chatterbox. Without a word between them, they pushed their way toward the back of the diner to where they knew their friends would be waiting.

The tryst had been a disaster.

The miniscule back seat offered no leg room and it had taken a good five minutes of squirming and adjusting simply to find a position that would allow limited movement. Resolving to face this like a man, Xander had reciprocated tongue-for-tongue on her overly enthusiastic kisses and as chivalrously as possible, he had assisted in her attempts to remove her pedal pushers and panties.

She had left her white blouse on but even in the dark, to Xander's horror, he could clearly see the outline of her nest of fluff. Fear and determination rolled off her as she leaned back against the side of the small car, her right leg was lifted over the backseat and her left foot rested on the floor.
Xander stared at the dark pubic hair and his heart pounded in his chest. He could detect the soft, faint smell of baby powder and realized she had prepared herself for him and this special moment. Claustrophobia was setting in. "Cordy, I don't...."

"Shhhhh. I'm scared too but it will be all right. Sandy says once you get started, nature will take over and it all falls into place. Do you have the...thing?"

Xander looked down and was surprised that he did have it although he couldn't remember retrieving it from the glove-box. Numbly, he nodded. "Yeah. I've never...."

"Do you want me to do it?"

Xander handed the condom to her and Cordy stuck the packet between her teeth. Using both hands, she reached for the zipper of his jeans and slowly opened it. The sound of the metal clicking one tooth at a time was deafening as Xander held his breath. When his pants were open, she reached in,
wrestled her way through the opening in his boxers and found....

He was still soft.

"I'm sorry. I don't.... I've never...."

"It's OK. I'm scared too. Maybe if I touch you for a while."

Xander closed his eyes and he strained. He tried to think of the Playboy magazines his father kept in the closet. He imagined himself humping and romping naked with Miss April as Miss January begged to join in.

Cordelia waited, unsure what to do. When it began to appear that the pony was never going to leave the gate, she hesitantly began to stroke and pull on him with an unfamiliar, too light touch.

Unfortunately, instead of enhancing the erotic picture in his brain, her hand did just the opposite. His erection mocked him with its refusal to cooperate as long as Cordelia was to be the
recipient. Still, he was an athlete and he did not accept defeat easily.

The windows in the car fogged over and the vehicle rocked from their movements, and every other couple on Lookout Point recognized the little VW and knew what Xander and Cordy were doing.

Except, they weren't.

After ten minutes of torture and humiliation, Xander stuffed himself away and he climbed off. He tossed her clothing at her and he jumped from the car while she dressed. After a few moments, Cordelia climbed out and returned, wordlessly, to the driver's seat. Xander got in beside her.

"Xan, I'm sorry. I...."

"DON'T. I just don't want to talk about it."

She nodded before turning the key.

And they drove off.
Xander was greatly relieved to see that his friends had secured the big booth in the far corner. It was round and seated as many as they could squeeze in, but it assured that he would not be plastered next to the one person on earth that he did not want to be with right now.

Without saying a word, he shoved his way into the end, causing Spike to immediately squish over against Willow who hurried to move. Oz sat next to her with Buffy beside him and Riley obediently on the end. Seeing that Xander did not intend to make room for her, Cordelia quietly eased in next to Riley.

Every eyebrow at the table went up. Buffy blinked as she stared at Cordelia. The usually meticulous girl was wrinkled, rumpled and her hair was wildly
fluffed. That, combined with the fact that the couple had arrived almost an hour late had Buffy's snoop alarms clanging loudly. Instantly, her head snapped to the side and she could read by Willow's expression that her friend shared her curiosity.

Suddenly, and without explanation, Buffy began scrambling in an attempt to climb over her companions. Willow did the same and the boys flipped and flopped to get out of the way. When she was out, Buffy grabbed Cordelia by the wrist and jerked her from the booth as Willow made her way to join them.

"You guys stay here. We gotta go pee."

Xander flinched as the three girls melted into the crush of their peers. Discretion was not a word Cordelia would have ever won a spelling bee on but hopefully this one time she would keep her damn mouth shut.

It didn't take long to realize that the hopeful looks on the remaining faces were waiting for a boastful,
descriptive explanation. None was apparently forthcoming and finally Oz spoke for the three of them.

"Sooo, the Xanman's laying pipe. Niiiice."

Xander groaned, dropped his face in his hands and prayed for a hole to open up in the floor-boards of the Chatterbox Diner.

~*~*~*~*~

Buffy roughly shoved Cordelia through the swinging door of the girl's bathroom. After squatting down to peek underneath all the stalls and make sure that they were alone she nodded and Willow took over.

"Holy shit! Cordy! You and Xan did the nasty, didn't you. Don't lie. We can see it all over you. Did it hurt? Did you bleed? Jackie the skank says you bleed the first time and that's how the guy knows he got your cherry. Where did you do it? Was it romantic? Did he whisper in your ear? Oh God, I'll
just bet Xan can be so romantic when he wants. Did you see it? DID YOU TOUCH IT?"

All the questions that were flying fast and furiously around her gave Cordelia time to regain some composure. She turned calmly to the mirror and began to smooth her hair and put her clothes in order while she contemplated her answers.

She could be honest. Yep, that was an option. One she would die before considering. Buffy and Willow lived vicariously through her and Cordelia owed it to them not to let them down. There was no sense in being graphic, but perhaps a short, descriptive narrative would do.

"This really isn't the sort of thing that a girl talks about. You know that's how reputations are ruined."

Buffy crossed her arms over her chest and leaned her full weight against the bathroom door to prevent anyone from interrupting or escaping before they had what they wanted. "Bullshit, Cordy."
This is us and that is Xan. Now give or we'll go ask him."

Even though Cordelia knew that was an unthinkable bluff, it accomplished its point and she turned back around to face them. Although they were alone, she dropped her voice to little more than a whisper and she gave them what she hoped would satisfy. "OK, but you have to swear that this goes no further."

Immediately, both girls' right hands shot up and three fingers of the Girl Scouts honor salute went up as a promise and agreement so, reluctantly, Cordelia continued.

"Well, Xander wanted to go up to Lookout Point. He said just to talk, but I knew better. When we got there, he started kissing me and he asked me to get in the backseat with him. I figured we were just going to make out for a while, like we always do but I guess this time he just got too carried away and couldn't stop. Then he showed me what he brought. He had a rubber! An honest-to-goodness real-life rubber. I haven't got a clue where he
bought it. I think all the guys carry them, mostly just for show but, well, we used it. What else can I say?"

All the air was sucked out of the room as Buffy and Willow stood in stunned silence. When it appeared no further information was going to be served up, Buffy pounced and the questions flew like leaves in a hurricane.

Meanwhile, the uncomfortable atmosphere in the red plastic booth continued. Each boy at the table was at his own level of manhood. Riley, who had been completely unsuccessful in his attempts to coax Buffy out of her panties had come to the conclusion that a few French kisses and a quick feel were all he would be able to draw on later when he got home and took himself in hand.

Oz was a porn guy. His idea of a romantic evening was a bottle of his mother's hand lotion, a Penthouse magazine he kept tucked under the mattress and a freshly rolled joint. After all that, nature took its course and he was a satisfied cowboy. No attachments and no complications.
In contrast, Spike, the newest member of the inner circle was the one who would have surprised them the most. Under the skillful tutelage of an older school chum named Wesley, Spike knew exactly who he was and what he wanted. They had shared a close friendship and Wesley had shown him the pleasures of another boy's body. Although they had never actually gone all the way, they had done nearly everything else. Wesley was the one thing Spike regretted leaving behind the most, and he wondered if there were any boys like him here in California.

But, for right now, he was in heaven. When Buffy climbed out, Spike had made no effort to scoot over into the vacated space. Instead, he had continued to press his smaller thigh firmly up against the hot, muscular leg beside him. He was fairly certain that Xander wasn't aware of their positions so he simply smiled and continued to revel. After a few moments, he took a giant leap and he tapped his foot up and down causing his leg to rub enough friction against Xander's that Spike feared he might
spontaneously combust.

Then, he did notice. As though a light bulb had gone off, Xander turned to fully face the pale skin, clear blue eyes and wide grin that was planted beside him. It was almost as though, up to this point, he hadn't even been aware of Spike's presence. With no words spoken, Xander turned to Oz. He pointed his thumb toward Spike and he waited.

Oz shrugged. "He's cool."

Xander turned back to face Spike as if to affirm Oz's observation. Spike squiggled in his seat and he nodded vigorously.

"Yep, I'm cool."

Xander huffed and that was all it took. Inexplicably and without any introspection necessary, Spike was in. He was accepted as part of the inner circle and his spot would be forever claimed and owned. Besides, Xander had other concerns as he stared off in the direction of the girls' room. He could only
imagine what the fuck Cordelia was telling them.

"Where the hell is Laverne? Goddamn, a guy could fucking starve to death around here."

"Oh, oh. You should so get the Elvis. I just had one and it was bloody magnificent!"

Xander frowned at Spike's chirpy statement.

"Bloody? Didn't Blacky cook it right? They should fucking fire that damn guy. He gets drunk every night then comes in here and...."

"Well, well. What have we here? Hello, girls. How's it hanging?"

Xander covered his face and groaned. Could this night get any worse? Eventually, he opened his eyes and turned to face the tall, thin boy who was leaning against the back of their booth.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Penn. You know you slags from Franklin High aren't allowed in this
part of town. Isn't there a pig trough over on the south side that will shovel some swill for you?"

Penn made no move to leave. To the contrary, he stuck his hand in the pocket of his jeans and he appeared to make himself even more at home.

"Ha ha! What a comedian you are. A real Jack Parr. It's a free country. I can go where I want. Ooo. What have we here? Looks like you girls have a new cheerleader on your squad. Oops, nope I guess you're a guy. Well, it was an obvious mistake."

Spike tipped his head to the side curiously. He knew the comment was meant to be insulting but he was reading something else in it. Something subtly slid between the lines. Before he could answer, Riley jumped to his aid.

"Go fuck yourself, Penn. You're just jealous cause you know there ain't no way in fuck you would ever be sittin' here."

Penn shoved off and took a step forward. He then
unexpectedly leaned over with both his palms slapped flat on the table and he looked directly into Spike's startled face. And he winked! "You ever want to hang with some real men, come on down to Franklin territory. We can show you what's really shakin'."

He then pushed off, stood up laughing and walked away. Spike gasped and turned to Riley for an explanation. "Who the hell was that and does he always flirt with other boys?"

Riley gave a dismissive, "Pfitt," that was shared by them all.

"He's just being a prick. He talks like that cause if he treats a guy like a girl it's an insult. You know, like he's callin' us sissies. Don't pay him no mind. Them Franklin guys are always looking for trouble."

Spike turned and watched as Penn left the diner and he wondered if that was really the whole truth of it.
Part Thirteen

"William? I thought I heard you down here. What on earth are you doing up at such an ungodly hour on a Sunday morning? Is there another Yogi Bear marathon?"

Rupert Giles stood in the doorway of the kitchen. He was wearing his plaid cotton pajamas, his thin, older-than-fuck bathrobe and his floppy slippers. Still, despite his attire, he also wore his air of authority which was only slightly diminished by the yawn and the fact that his glasses were left by his bed.

Spike sat, nearly bouncing in his seat at the breakfast table munching a piece of toast. The truth was, he had barely slept all night and although he knew it was early, he couldn't wait to start the day.
"This is bigger than cartoons. I told you last night, Da. Today is the day Xander is going to start my surfing lessons. He said to meet him bright and early down on the beach and I don't want to be late. Hey, I found a loaf of bread on the sideboard. Where'd that come from?"

Rupert's hand flew up in an automatic response to remove and polish his glasses only to discover that they inconveniently weren't there. Flustered and sputtering, he immediately turned toward the sink to hide the guilt he knew must be showing on his face and he began to wipe down the counter, cleaning away the nonexistent crumbs. "Ah, yes, well, Je...I mean, Miss Calendar was good enough to supply that until I could make a trip to the grocer this afternoon to stock up."

"Did she give you anything else?"

Rupert spun around, his eyes were huge with stunned outrage and a plethora of denials formed wildly through his brain. "Now see here, young
man, just what is it that you are asking me?"

Spike popped the last bit of toast into his mouth and studied his father's bizarre reaction. It just confirmed his suspicions that people over 30 were weird and confusing. "I just wondered if she gave you some milk or cereal. Geesh, Da, what's up with you this morning?"

Rupert slumped against the sink in relief. He had not been found out. His improprieties with the very attractive and apparently equally loose Miss Calendar were still, and would hopefully remain, his dark little secret. It certainly would not do to have his innocent, impressionable young boy think of his father as a letch. And in that resolved frame of mind, Rupert vowed to never see the alluring and skillful Miss Calendar again. "Oh, no, sorry, no milk or cereal and really, William we must be self-sufficient. We do not want anyone to think that we are needy of what they may supply. Even if it is sometimes what we think we want at the moment, in the long run we must keep our dignity intact."
"Huh?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, William. Don't you have somewhere to be?"

Spike stood up. He threw his towel over his shoulder and he frowned at his father. He hoped the drastic move to the States hadn't caused some sort of mental defect in the old geezer. Finally, with a dismissive shrug, Spike bid his father farewell and he rushed from the house. He jumped on his bike and, pedaling as fast as he could, he headed for the beach.

After a few minutes on a now well-known path, Spike reached the parking lot. He slotted his bicycle and jumped with happiness. Barely dawn, the beach was nearly deserted and it didn't take long to spot the one lone figure lying in the sand. Without hesitation, William ran to meet him.

"Good morning. I'm here. How shall we start?"

Xander turned his head and looked up languidly
from his lounging position. When he saw Spike standing there he frowned. Spike was wearing swim trunks and a tee.

"Goddamn, Spike. You're white as a fucking sheet. We might have to change your name to Casper the fucking ghost. One day out here and you'll burn like a slab of fresh fish in a hot skillet. Don't you got no suntan lotion?"

Still panting from his run across the sand, Spike looked at himself. He had to admit, he was a bit on the pale side. A problem he really had given no extensive thought to. "Oh, no I don't. Oh, please don't cancel our lesson. I promise I won't burn."

Xander huffed and hoisted himself to his feet. He scooped up his towel and he tucked his board under his arm. He then started to walk away with Spike scurrying after.

"No, we'll still have a lesson, but I have a better idea. Come on. But after this, you better show up covered head to toe in lotion, you hear me?"
Spike lost step and stumbled at the mental image of his body all slicked up and rubbing against Xander's. Glistening in the sun. Greasy, oily, slimy and smooth. Quickly, however, he caught control and he hurried to catch up.

The next half hour was spent in pleasant chitchat as they strolled the streets of Sunnydale. Spike walked his bike as Xander carried the huge board almost effortlessly under his arm. Xander pointed out landmarks and asked Spike about his own hometown. They talked comfortably and as the time and trip passed, Spike never thought to ask where they were going. Until they arrived at an unkempt ranch-style house on an eclectic street.

"Where are we?"

"My place. My garage to be more specific. Come on."

Unquestioningly, Spike followed as Xander raised the overhead garage door and they moved inside.
He leaned his bike against the far wall and stood by patiently as Xander went about the business of whatever the fuck he was doing. Spike watched as the other boy set up a pair of wooden saw-horses. Xander then balanced his surfboard over them and tested its stability. With a satisfied nod of his head, Xander waved his hand in a 'come on' motion and Spike eased over warily.

"What?"

"Climb on."

"What? On that? You must be kidding."

"No. Actually, this is the perfect way to start. You need to get a feel for the board beneath you. I'll show you how to lie on it, paddle your arms and then stand. Once you're on your feet, you need to see how it will feel to move back and forth as you shift your weight to maintain your balance to keep from taking a dunk. Hey, just out of curiosity, you do know how to swim don't you?"
Spike pulled himself up proudly to his full height of five foot and some change, and he snorted. "I'll have you know that my previous academy schooled me in all the appropriate athletics. I swim, ride, fence and have participated in the interscholastic rivalries of both soccer and cricket."

Xander's face scrunched up. Although clearly bonkers, Spike was a likeable little fuck. And really all that mattered out of that odd speech was that, yeah, he can swim. "Ok, then. Here we go. Grab onto the side of the board and roll onto it on your stomach."

Spike did as told and was thrilled when he landed without toppling off.

"Hey, look! I made it! I...wait, what are you doing?"

Xander began at Spike's waist gripping and adjusting his placement on the board. He then ran his fingertips down his backbone to assure that it was straight and he wasn't humping up tensely. Spike sighed and shivered slightly at the wonderful
pressure of the warm, rough touch. When the hands moved to his hips, Spike closed his eyes and rested his forehead on the cool wooden board. Every inch of his body felt like exposed nerve endings that tingled and sparked and the resulting reaction was an increased blood flow to his dick.

His brain chanted to his cock in a repeated mantra of 'Don't get hard. Don't get hard. Don't get hard. Goddamn it you little fucker, don't get hard.'

Feeling the rigid body clenching in his hold, Xander attempted to get Spike to ease up.

"Relax. I've got you. You won't fall."

Xander ran his hands down the backs of Spike's thighs. He then gripped the boy's thin ankles and he shook the legs to loosen them up as he spread the feet apart. It registered briefly that touching all this bare skin did not squick him in the slightest. Odd, but not anything that held his attention.

"Good. You're doing good. Now, when you think
you're ready, you're going to shift your weight to your arms and quickly hoist your knees up under you. Straighten your arms, lock your elbows and push yourself to stand. You have to do it quick or a wave will knock you off. The second you're on your feet, shift your weight to find your balance. You ready to try?"

Spike tried to remember all Xander had said. Luckily, the fear, tension and concentration caused a flagging in his budding erection and at least if he fell it wouldn't be with an obscene tent pole poking out in the front of his trunks. So, following the instructions, Spike gave it a try. It apparently was not as easy as it would have seemed. His knees banged painfully on the first two attempts and his arms refused to support him. He grabbed tightly as he nearly went head first and he stubbed his toe. All the while, Xander stood by offering encouragement and undeserved praise which drove him to continue trying.

Finally, after taking a moment to compose himself, Spike ran all the steps through his head and with a
nod of renewed determination, he heaved. His arms went tense, his knees folded under his chest and his elbows locked. Before he could overthink himself, he shoved and lifted himself to his feet. After a whoop of success and shock, Spike leaned just a hair too far forward and he tumbled off.

Directly into Xander's arms where their lips mashed in an unexpected kiss that Spike made no move to end.

Even more astonishing was the fact that neither did Xander.

Part Fourteen

Time stood still and the garage seemed void of oxygen as neither boy moved. Spike continued, with his eyes closed, to press his smaller cool lips against the fuller warm ones. In contrast, Xander's eyes
bugged open wide. His brain screamed, 'What the fuck?' yey his body did not seem to share his inner horrified confusion.

Even the stunning feel of the tip of the small tongue that licked across Xander's sealed lips was not enough to shake him from his stupor. Not until the appalling revelation that one rigid erection was pressing against another did Xander yank himself from the astounding situation and allow his brain to regain control over his behavior.

At that point, he gripped Spike's slim shoulders and he shoved the boy away. He blinked as he sucked gulps of air into his lungs while his fingers drifted to his lips that still tingled deliciously. Knowing that he had just made a crucial mistake, Spike stepped back out of punching range and he threw his hands up in apology and surrender.

"Xander, I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. I was just so happy about getting it all right that I.... Please, I'm sorry. Don't be mad."
Xander was dumbfounded. He was confused and flustered but, surprisingly, when he searched the playlist of his emotions, 'mad' was not on the board. The only feeling he was absolutely certain of was that the dick between his legs was hard as a rock and in desperate need of immediate manual attention.

"No. No, I'm not mad. Hey, I get enthusiastic over surfing too. OK, OK, well, I think that will do it for today. Lesson over. You need to go. Now. I'll meet you tomorrow at the beach. Wear lotion. Go. Go."

Spike reluctantly collected his bike and allowed himself to be roughly escorted out the door because, really, what else could he do? He threw his leg over the bar and winced as he sat and began to pedal. It was a short trip made in near agony as no amount of counting, concentrating or singing would make his painful erection subside. Knowing what would, he stood on the bike and pumped his feet as hard as his legs would allow. Relief flooded through him when his house came into view. He turned onto the sidewalk, leapt off, allowing the bicycle to fall to
the ground and he charged in, rushing straight for his bedroom.

~*~*~*~*~

The absence of Xander's father's car from the garage had assured him that his parents had gone to his Aunt Ruth's house for Sunday lunch as was their practice. It gave him at least three hours of undisturbed privacy which was about two hours and fifty minutes more than he would require.

The urgent driving need for relief blocked out any desire for introspection and contemplation as to the source of this sudden sexual zeal. Wasting no time, he pulled off the swim trunks he wore and he kicked them to the side. He snatched his mother's bottle of Avon lotion from the vanity and he hissed as the first cold drops hit the bulging, leaking head.

He stared down as the red slit sneered at him, challenging him, mocking him, daring him to prove he had the manual dexterity to get the job done.
Xander growled at the headstrong prick. He slapped his large, rough palm around its girth and he stepped up to the plate.

Placing one foot on the rim of the toilet, Xander spread his feet wide and he squatted in his familiar, preferred position. He would not appease or coddle Mr. Dick with gentle touches or sweet words of romance. If Cock-a-doodle wanted jerked, by God, Xander would jerk him off. So he did.

He groaned as he rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. He leaned forward, resting one hand on the wall behind the toilet and he let his hand do it's best.

He cleared all thoughts from his mind and he focused on the feeling of the wonderful cock in his hand. Every inch of it felt alive and tingly as his hand gripped, pulled and twisted it. It was staggering. He had never experienced this level of intensity. It was frightening and absolutely magnificent.

His balls were full and heavy with the promise of a
gallon of hot, waiting spunk. Impatience had his hand working at a blurring speed while a nonstop series of whines and moans filled the room. Oh, yeah, he and Mr. Dick were certainly on the same page now.

Finally it started. The familiar twitch in his stomach muscles that always preceded the zing down his spine followed by the clenching of his anus and a sharp, nearly painful drawing up of his nuts.

"Yeah, yeah, come on, baby. Come on."

Suddenly the picture that formed behind his eyelids threw him for a loop. It was a playback. A rewind and replay of the events of the morning. When the screening hit the point of the small cool tongue that licked his lips seeking entry, Xander jerked forward. Every muscle in his body went rigid and his cock unloaded.

It shot powerful wads of thick, white cum that splattered the lid and seat, wildly missing the bowl of water. The waves of the orgasm crashed over
him again and again like the force of the ocean until finally he was left weak, exhausted and thoroughly sated. Panting as though he had run a marathon, Xander opened his eyes and chuckled at the mess he would have to clean up. Snatching his mother's best guest towel off the rack, Xander made a couple cursory swipes before dropping it to the floor and happily heading to the kitchen for a snack.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike slammed the front door and rushed for the steps. The house was empty and he vaguely recalled his father's planned trip to the grocer. At this point it wouldn't have mattered. He and the ambiguous Miss Calendar could have been sitting on the couch eating pie and Spike wouldn't have cared. He needed a wank and he needed it NOW.

Flopping onto his back on his rumpled bed, Spike wriggled out of his trunks. He was careful not to damage his engorged willy, or worse, provide even
the slightest fabric-to-skin contact which would result in a premature ejaculation. Once the trunks were well rid of, he reached under his bed for the tin of hair wax he had brought from London and he scooped out a blob with his finger.

Holding his dick in one hand, he watched as he slowly, tortuously smeared the thick grease all over his throbbing meat. It felt wonderful, both cool and hot and he wasted no time in coating, stroking and smoothing it from the tip all the way down his balls to the silky strip of skin behind.

With his feet flat on the bed and his knees wide, Spike went to work with the practiced efficiency of an experienced wanker. He sighed and moaned. He whispered curses and he grunted when a fingertip accidentally, on purpose, slipped inside. There was no shame in his game. He knew what was on his mind and what drove his need.

"Xander."

The feel of the larger boy's strong body pressing
against him as they kissed was the stuff of dreams and wishes. It was erotic fantasy of the best kind because it was real. He knew Xander was with Cordelia, but Spike didn't care because Xander got hard when they kissed. Xander was hard for him.

"Oh, fuck, Xander."

Spike's words were soft and quiet. They traveled from lips on puffs of hopes and dreams and they spoke only one word. "Xander." It was all Spike needed. His hand and his brain worked in unison to build a world of sexual delights and adventures that saw the two boys doing all the things Spike had done with Wesley. And more. Spike wanted it all with Xander.

With that realization. Spike stroked faster. He felt the heady drops of early release dribble over his fingers and he pulled his cock high and hard against his stomach, lifting his balls and allowing his other hand to reach his puckered palace. It was the secret kingdom he wanted Xander to rule.
He could see it in his mind. They would lie together lovingly. Kissing, fondling, touching everything and everywhere. When they could stand it no longer, Xander would beg so prettily that Spike would give in. He would lift his legs with his knees against his chest. Xander would kiss him once more and climb on top of him. Before either of them could second-guess their decision. Xander would shove his big, beautiful dick into Spike's tender, virginal arse.

With that as his all-consuming thought, Spike roughly shoved two fingers into himself. The shock of the sudden burn caused his body to tremble, his eyes to open wide and his hand to falter. Immediately, he realized something stunning. It was the most glorious pain he had ever known and he wanted more. His back arched up and his head flopped down. His eyes rolled back and his hand resumed it's repetitive task while his other fingers experimentally moved in and out.

The novelty and the increased stimulation had the expected result. Within seconds, his dick grew harder than he ever thought possible before
suddenly, and without warning, squirting upwards with a speed and strength that had it landing in a puddle that stretched from his stomach up to his hairless chest.

"Oh, bloody hell!"

When he had enough strength, Spike chuckled. His iron grip on his dick released and both his arms flopped onto the bed. His last thought before dozing off was that he smelled like a whore house. He needed a bath. Maybe later.

~*~*~*~*~

"Oh, dear lord!"

Rupert Giles slumped back on the prissy, flowered sofa in Jenny Calendar's drawing room. His pants were on the floor and his boxers down around his hips. He looked down at the smiling woman kneeling between his knees and tried not to stare at the pearly drops sliding down her chin.
"Really, Jenny, this cannot continue! I simply came over here for directions to the neighborhood grocer. This....random coupling is most undignified. This is it! No more, I say! This shall NOT happen again!"

Placing her hands on his bony knees, Jenny hoisted herself to her feet. She then patted his chest lovingly and walked around to his side. "You're absolutely right, Rupe. This will never happen again. Now, as for the grocer, you just sit right there and after I brush my teeth and freshen up a tad I will personally take you there. I need to get a few things myself. How about a ham? Do you and your son like ham? I just think ham is the perfect thing for a hearty Sunday dinner. Even though we aren't going to be doing THIS anymore doesn't mean I can't cook for you does it?"

"Oh, well, I don't see why one should...."

"Great! I'll be five minutes. Oh, and maybe you should put your pants on. This is a very conservative
neighborhood you know. It wouldn't do for us to be strolling down the street with you in your all-together."

Rupert immediately scrambled for his pants, all the time huffing and mumbling. "Conservative, my bloody arse!"<

Part Fifteen

Buffy sat by the bedroom window looking out over the green, freshly mowed back yard below. When the sun had gotten too high and their stomachs too empty, she and Willow had returned to the Rosenberg house for a late lunch of watercress sandwiches, which Buffy hated, and a stack of chocolate chip cookies.

It was odd. For a Sunday afternoon, the beach had been dead. It should have been packed with all their
classmates worshiping the Sun God and reveling in their newly paroled status, but none of the regulars were there.

She knew Riley was working at the garage and it didn't take a genius to guess what Oz was up to.

Somebody said Xander and the newbie, Spike, had gone back to Xander's place because of some sort of arrangement to teach Spike to surf, which Buffy thought was extraordinarily bizarre. How could you learn anything to do with water if you weren't in the water?

It was something that, on any other day, she would have pondered. Yet today, compared with the more urgent matter on her mind, whatever Spike and Xander were doing had to be uninteresting and boring.

Basically, she didn't much care. She was just as glad to be here in the private company of her best friend and she was in the mood to talk. Glancing back over her shoulder, she looked at Willow who was
stretched out on her bed reading a Teen Scene magazine with a pouting Sal Mineo on the cover.

"Boy, you sure are all up into that rag. What's so interesting?"

Willow tossed aside the mag and she sat up with her legs crossed and a serious expression on her face. "Do you think I look like Ann Margaret? We both have red hair and green eyes. Wow, have you ever seen the way she walks? Damn, it just all shimmies like a bowlful of jelly. I wonder how you learn to move like that."

Buffy scrunched up her nose and tipped her head to study her friend from every angle as she tried to find the resemblance. Nope. Wasn't there."I don't think it's something you learn. I think you either got it or you don't."

Immediately, Willow sprang to her feet. She dramatically tossed her hair over her shoulder and at the risk of dislocation, she flipped herself from side to side as she took long, dancing steps across
the room. Buffy offered her most delicate critique. "Nah, something is missing."

Willow stopped and looked at herself in the vanity mirror. Her face lit up and she snapped her fingers. Spinning around, she hurried to her dresser, where she jerked open a drawer and pulled out two pair of rolled-up socks. She then stuffed one pair in each tiny bra cup and she heaved and hoisted until her small chest stuck out in two huge bumps.

"How's that? Better? Oh, yeah, I really look like her now. Don't 'cha think? You know, they say she's doin' it with Elvis. Oh, my God. Can you imagine that?"

Buffy snorted in disgust. Willow's simple question and observation brought Buffy's issue back to the forefront and she was ready to give Willow a jolt of reality. She jumped to her feet and waved her hands wildly. "No, Wil, I can't imagine it. I have no idea what the hell it would look like to see two people pledge and consummate their love in an expression of physical boinking. I can't imagine it
because I have never done it! We're freakin' virgins, Wil, and from the looks of things, we are going to die decrepit old maids and still be freakin' virgins!"

The unexpected outburst left the redhead stunned. Her mouth fell open and her left sock boob slipped two inches down, giving her a cockeyed chest that bore no resemblance whatsoever to Ann Margaret. "Holy shit, Buf. What crawled up your butt hole?"

Buffy darted over, grabbed Willow's bony wrists and pulled her down to sit together on the end of Willow's pink princess bedspread. Buffy's face was flushed and her voice was low and confidential just in case the nosey Mrs. Rosenberg happened to be looming nearby. Which she often was.

"Cordy and Xan did it! Doesn't that just send shivers up and down your spine? She actually laid down and let him put his thingy in her hoo-ha. That is just the ultimate! It is so romantic that it makes my head want to explode. It means true love. It means that Xan is hers forever and they will get married as soon as we graduate and here we are still wearing
pukey bows in our hair and trying to imagine Elvis in his man-panties. Well, I don't intend to be left behind! If Cordelia can do it so can I!"

Willow slapped her hand over her mouth in horror. She could not believe what her friend was insinuating. Surely she wasn't serious. A girl's cherry was not something to be bandied about like an overinflated dodgeball. If you lost your cherry, your reputation went down the drain and then NO decent boy would have you.

"What the fudge are you suggesting, Buffy?"

Buffy crossed her arms and a look of stark determination squinted her eyes. "You know exactly what I'm saying. This is going to be my summer. My season of womanhood and the awakening of my unbridled passions. I intend on doing it!"

Willow briefly considered that Buffy had simply gotten too much sun and was delirious, but she knew that wasn't the case. She had seen that expression before and she realized that Buffy meant
business. As her best friend in the world, Willow felt it was her obligation to talk her pal back off the edge before she jumped from a height that would cause irreparable damage.

"Now, wait a minute, Buff. You're talking crazy. I mean, sure, it was a shock but Cordy and Xan are all but engaged. She has been wearing his class ring for months. What they did was wrong but she has a subscription to Bride magazine. It doesn't get much more serious than that. I didn't think you and Riley were...."

Unable to meet Willow's eyes, Buffy turned her face away. "I'm not talking about Riley."

Willow scratched her head in confusion. "Well then who the hell...?"

"Angel. I'm going to ask Angel."

Much to Buffy's stunned horror, Willow threw her head back and she let out a piercing, blood-curdling scream that had Judy Rosenberg charging through
the bedroom door with the baseball bat in her hand. She was bosomy, breathless and bug-eyed as she scanned the area for the threat to her daughter's life.

She had been telling her husband for years to remove that trellis outside Willow's window. She just knew the day would come when some sex-crazed vagabond would find his way to town and take advantage of the ladder to Willow's Jewish heaven.

Just as she was about to drop to her arthritic knees and peer under the bed, Willow casually flipped her hand as though nothing had happened. "Oops, sorry, Ma. Buffy and I saw a spider."

"A spider? That was all about a spider! Really! Willow! You know I have a bad heart. You simply can't be.... What is that on your chest? Why is your shirt all lumpy?"

"Um, I guess I forgot to iron it. I'm sorry I scared you, Ma, but it's all cool now. Sorry, but hey, lunch
was great."

Willow put her hands on her mother's shoulders and with an innocent smile she shoved the older woman from the room and slammed the bedroom door behind her. She then spun around to face the ignorance that was her friend. She marched over to her and promptly slapped Buffy sharply across the cheek.

"OW! HEY! What did you do that for?"

Willow put her fists on her hips and watched as Buffy briskly rubbed the pink glow on the side of her face.

"Because that's what they do in the movies when someone is demented and clearly insane. You are NOT giving your virginity to that beach bum, Angel. He has no job. He won't marry you and he has a reputation for diddling every woman in town. Even the married ones! He will not respect you, Buffy, and neither will anyone else when they find out, and believe me, they will find out. No, no, no, no.
You are not slipping off the panties for that pot-selling, beer-drinking, sand creep, Angel O'Connor."

Buffy leapt to her feet and she squared off. "You're just jealous cause he likes me best and besides, you don't know him like I do. For your information, he is sweet and kind and gentle and he just needs the right girl to change him into the perfect husband. And that girl is ME!"

**Part Sixteen**

"But why not?"

The high-pitched whine on the other end of the line sent prickles of irritation up and down his spine as he fought the urge to simply hang up the phone.

"Because, I told you. Spike is paying me to teach him to surf and I need the money. It's more than I would make bussing tables at the Chatterbox and it gets me closer to my car. If you come along, I can't concentrate on him."
There was a pause on the other end. Cordelia knew he was right but the sick feeling of doom in the pit of her stomach would not allow her to drop it. "You've been acting funny ever since Saturday night. Are you avoiding me?"

The terrible memory of the humiliation that occurred, or didn't occur, in the backseat rushed back in full color and Xander cringed. "No. No, of course not. Look, it just wasn't the right time or place. It was too cramped. My stomach was still queasy from that lunch burrito. My mind was distracted. I had a charley-horse in my left foot. Jesus, Cordy, can we just NOT talk about this?"

"Oh, yeah, sure but, um....we are OK, aren't we? I mean we are still...."

Xander gripped the heavy black receiver with both hands and closed his eyes. It was time to man up and end this charade. Dump her. Break it off. End it cleanly. Do it with a smile and, like Bob Hope always said, "Thanks for the memories."
She used to be fun. One of the guys to joke with. Now, spending time with her made him feel like he was in an old Vincent Price movie and he had a cage of rats clamped on his head. Then, with a sigh, he did what he always did. He acquiesced. "Sure. Sure. We're fucking peachy. Look, Cordy, I really got to go. I'm supposed to meet Spike at the beach in ten minutes and I'm already running late. I'll call ya later."

Cordelia smiled weakly and automatically fiddled with the class ring that hung on the gold chain around her neck. "Oh, of course. I didn't want...I mean as long as we are cool and.... Xan?"

But it was too late. The line was already dead. Cordelia reluctantly hung up. This was not starting out to be the summer she had planned.

~*~*~*~*~
"So, what do you have organized for the day, William?"

Rupert refolded the morning newspaper and laid it on the breakfast table. He sipped his tea and studied the boy sitting across from him who was happily munching his cereal.

"I told you yesterday, Da. Xander, my new friend, is going to teach me to surf. He is really good and he promised he could have me riding the waves in no time."

Spike conveniently left out the part about his paying dearly for the lessons. Truth was, if he had the money, he would have happily paid a million pounds for the thrill of splashing around, half naked in the warm ocean waters with the handsome and very kissable Xander Harris.

Rupert frowned. It sounded like a risky and dangerous endeavor and after losing his beloved wife, the thought of any physical harm coming to
his precious son sent shudders throughout his usually reserved body. "Frankly, William, I am not wholly convinced that that is a good idea. There are numerous inherent perils in an activity like that. Drowning, sharks, undercurrents...."

"What's the deal with Miss Calender?"

"Ack. What? What do you mean by 'the deal'? There is no 'deal,' William. She is simply a very nice neighbor who knew we were still unsettled. It was only dinner, William. That's all. That's it. She mentioned ham and before I knew it she had invited us over for what I felt was a very lovely dinner. We should be thanking her, not accusing her."

Spike batted his eyes innocently at his father. The diversionary tactic worked like a charm. The fact was, the dinner last evening at the house next door had been both delicious and entertaining. Spike had no idea what was going on between his father and the aggressive woman, but it certainly sat all right with Spike.
Da's new friend was a welcome surprise. He had long been of the opinion that his father needed female companionship. Man cannot live by his own hand alone and, as an added bonus, it might just give Spike some unscrutinized time of his own.

"Gee, Da. I wasn't accusing her of anything. I think it's swell that she cooked for us and from the way she looked at you, I think she really likes you. Don't you like her?"

Rupert immediately pulled off his glasses and began polishing the lenses as he carefully considered the appropriate, objective wording needed to intellectually evaluate and explain the complex situation between the two adults.

"Yes, well, um, like? Like might be too strong a word, William. Well, no, I suppose like is an accurate depiction of.... Yes, like. All right. Yes, I suppose I like her well enough. Oh, dear Lord. Look at the time! I have early meetings at the university and will be tied up most of the day so you will be on
your own. There is plenty of leftover ham in the cooler and we can eat out for dinner. Have a good day, son, and please be very careful."

Rupert kissed the grinning boy on the top of the head and before the conversation could return to the landmine field of Jenny Calendar, he grabbed his suit jacket and hustled out the door. As soon as the older man was gone, Spike jumped up. He rinsed his bowl in the sink and collected his things. He had a towel rolled up with a bottle of Coppertone inside, which he tucked under his arm, and he had his money folded neatly and shoved into his shoe.

Dashing out to the garage, he hopped on his bike and his legs began to pump. After just two days, it was a trek he knew well and within minutes he was parking in the row of bike slots and running across the sand. He was panting, breathless and eager. He headed toward the spot that Xander should have been waiting, only to find a blond girl sitting there.

He approached cautiously, stopping when he stood
alongside. She had long, loose hair and wore a floppy-brimmed hat and a flowered caftan that covered her from the neck to the ankles. When she turned her head and looked up at him, he was struck by the genuine openeness in her face and smile.

"Hi. I'm Spike. I was looking for a friend of mine. His name is Xander. Do you know Xander?"

The girl tucked her legs up under herself and she laughed. It was a light sound that tinkled in Spike's ear like fairy wings and bluebells. She patted the blanket beside her and without hesitation, Spike sat down.

"It's very nice to meet you Spike. I'm Tara. Yes, I know Xan. We go to school together. He comes out here every day to surf. Why don't you keep me company for a while and I'll bet he's here before you know it."

The next thirty minutes were, for Spike, amazing. He luxuriated in the feel of the warm sun and the
soft breeze as she spoke of ideas and concepts that were foreign to him. Things that would never have crossed mind like not eating meat and living off the bounties of nature. She enlightened him on the evils of the growing escalations in the war in Viet Nam and she prophesied that all of the world would one day rise up and protest against the very idea of oppression and violence.

Spike asked Tara if she were a beatnik and she just smiled. She explained that society was about to take the next big step from that and she wanted to be part of it. The confidence and conviction in her voice made him want to be part of it too.

"Hi. Sorry I'm late. I had to wait on Mom. She dropped me off. Oh, hey, Tara."

Spike tipped his head upward and squinted against the glare of the sun and into the smiling, handsome face of his tutor. Spike's heart skipped a beat as the flush of the memory of yesterday's kiss heated his cheeks. Tara's eyebrows rose slightly as she glanced between the two boys before a gentle smile lifted
the corners of her lips.

"Hi, Xan. I was keeping Spike company till you got here."

Spike scrambled to his feet and he collected his things. He waited patiently while Xander and Tara exchanged bland pleasantries and finally he fell into step behind as Xander walked away. When they reached their own spot of a spread-out blanket, Xander rammed the end of his board in the sand to stand it upright and he plopped down.

Spike sat across from him and waited. With their bodies this close, Spike knew his suspicions were right. He had a crush. A big old buddy crush that even though it would not be returned, there was no reason why he couldn't secretly enjoy every second of it.

"Spike, before we start, I think we need to talk about that, um...thing. I don't want any weirdness between us. It was, ah, shit, I don't know, but I promise it won't..."
"No, I understand. I tripped and your mouth was just in my line of topple. It was simply a freak accident. It should have no relevance in our arrangement."

Xander was overwhelmed with relief. That had gone much better than he had feared and now they could put it behind them and get on with the business at hand.

"Yeah, great! Great. So. If you're ready for the experience of a lifetime, let's hit the waves!"

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**Part Seventeen**

Xander took long, purposeful strides through the sand. He had his trusty board under his arm and his eager student following closely behind. Although still early morning, the heat of the sun and a nearly
cloudless sky promised that today would be picture perfect.

Several mothers with young children were setting up with blankets and picnic baskets for a leisurely day of sandcastles and baking flesh. Expertly, Xander dodged around them, ignoring their shouts and playful squeals as he headed for the crashing waves of the Pacific Ocean.

After tossing Spike from his garage on Sunday, Xander had spent a confused and very masturbatory afternoon cloistered in his bedroom. By the time his mother had called him for supper, he could hardly walk. When she questioned him, he blushed and blamed it on a cramp.

Nighttime brought him no relief as his dreams were an odd tale of Cordelia morphing into a cartoon shark by the name of Jabberjaw who tried to devour him. He had frantically swam for a shore that never got closer as she snapped and lunged at his testicles.
When exhaustion threatened to slow him, he came upon a small rock that emerged from the ocean. On the rock sat an ethereal mermaid who offered him her hand. Xander reached out and was pulled effortlessly from the water. As he fell onto the rock, his lips met the mermaid's and he realized it was a man. A merman. Spike. He was kissing Spike. Again.

Xander awoke with wet, sticky boxers and a rush of shame. After giving it much thought, he decided that it didn't mean anything. After all, he was seventeen. He could get off on thoughts of linoleum. Still, it could be very awkward.

He took a shower and considered just not showing up at the beach. He could still go down to the diner and he was fairly certain that they would take him on. If not bussing tables, maybe washing dishes or late-night clean up. If worse came to worst, his dad had mentioned that Mason's Grocery was looking for a boy to stock shelves and bag groceries.

It was the thought of all these options skipping through his brain that had Xander tugging on his
swim trunks and favorite tee. He knew his soul would just shrivel up and die if he had to spend the sunny days of his last summer inside wearing a button-down and chinos. Especially when there was another option.

When his mother dropped him at the beach, Xander paused. He spotted Spike sitting with Tara and, before Spike could see him, he took a minute to really look the new boy over. He was small, pale, and very girly looking. Oddly, it made him somewhat attractive, a thought that shook Xander as he wondered where the fuck an idea like that would have come from. Before he could back out, Xander hurried over. "Hi. Sorry I'm late. I had to wait for my mom to drop me. Oh, hi, Tara."

Spike turned his face upward in response to the warm voice and their eyes met. Immediately, Xander was rocked by odd, unfamiliar feelings that swept through him. It was disconcerting. It was unsettling. It caused whatever Tara was saying to him to melt into 'wa wa' sounds that floated over his head and off into space.
Quickly, Xander collected his student and he hustled them off to an open spot on the beach. He spread out a shabby, worn blanket and he turned to Spike. "Ready for the adventure of a lifetime?"

Unashamedly, Spike jumped up and down, clapping his hands. Xander laughed at the boy's enthusiasm and was delighted to realize that there wasn't any of the clumsy uneasiness between them that he had feared. Obviously the boy had forgotten all about their accidental slide to first base.

"I am, yes. Oh, Xander, this is wonderful. Look! I have spread lotion all over myself just like you instructed and I have brought your money. Please, can we start now?"

Xander tucked the board under his arm and chuckled. It really was a beautiful day in Sunnydale, California.

"Let's go." And he took off at a smart trot with his student right behind. They skipped and dodged
around children and sandcastles, and neither gave more than a glance to the bikini-clad bathing beauties that dotted the landscape. When they reached the shoreline, Xander waded out till he was knee-deep in the froth and foam of the crashing waves. The familiar roar in his ears made shouting a necessity. "OK, I'm going to hold the back of the board. Roll onto it like I showed you and lay on your stomach. I want you to get the feel of it. I promise I won't let go."

Spike quickly did as he was told. Xander's promise was taken as fact and he trusted his teacher implicitly. With the ocean smacking him in the legs, making balance precarious at best, he gripped the board as he had been taught and he flung himself up and over. Unfortunately, his hold was no match for a sudden wave, and his feet washed out from under him. Down he went.

He immediately popped up, spitting sea water, blinking and sputtering curses. His hair was sticking straight up in a bizarre mass of wet, plastered curls and his blue eyes bugged. Xander roared with
laughter. "Damn! You went down like a ton of shit! The exact same thing happened to me on my first try. Shake it off. Try again."

When Spike realized Xander was not making fun of him, he grinned and nodded. He slicked his hair back and the tip of his pink tongue poked out the corner of his mouth in determination. He took a moment to get the feel of the rhythm of the waves and he grabbed the board. And he leapt.

Landing squarely with an "Oomph" on his stomach, Spike held on for dear life. This was nothing like their practice in the garage and he was certain that at any moment now he would be tossed into the drink. He spread his legs for balance and his fingers gripped the rim of the wooden board as the ocean splashed salt water over his face.

"Hey! You got it on the second try!"

Xander stood at the back of the board. He held it firmly as it rose and fell, rocking side to side, giving Spike a chance to understand the feel of the board
in the water while Xander maintained his own balance with widespread feet. Directly in front of him were Spike's open thighs, which led to the swell of his perky, round ass.

As the waves rolled beneath the board, the butt bounced and shifted in a manner that Xander found inexplicably fascinating. His concentration was at last broken when one extra-large wave crashed against Xander's rocky coast. Xander blinked. He had another hard-on? He rolled his eyes and groaned.

He needed a ride. He needed to relieve his tension in the only way he knew how. He needed to surf. "Hang on! We're going to take a ride. You want to try?"

Spike heard Xander's voice as it boomed over the ear-pounding sounds of the ocean and, for a moment, his only response was confusion. A ride? *What does he mean...?* "Wait! I'm not.....No! Xander, I can't....."
But it was too late. Xander shoved off and he effortlessly lifted himself onto Spike's body. He fit perfectly. The slight concave of Xander's stomach was supported by the soft pillows of Spike's butt and Xander's chest pressed down on his student's cool, wet back. Xander had done this before when he tried to teach Cordelia to surf. It had felt awkward and the entire experience had been a disaster.

This time was different. Ignoring the shouts, grunts and incoherent rants of his passenger, Xander's long, strong arms reached around and began to paddle, forcing the board with its tandem riders out and into the wild of the ocean.

Spike held on for dear life. His heart pounded in his chest and his lungs burned from holding his breath against the deluge of water. Added to that was the incredible feel of the weight of Xander's body that crushed him against the board, pressing his hard dick into the wooden surfboard. Spike felt lightheaded and giddy from the combination of terror and sexuality.
It was overwhelming. Xander's breath puffed warm bursts against Spike's cheeks as he strained and drove them further and further out until Spike wondered if they were heading for the Hawaiian Islands. The sheer supremacy of the ocean held sway over them and could, Spike knew, swamp and claim them at any time.

Yet it didn't. It didn't because Xander was calling the shots. He kept them safe and Spike knew his life was in very capable hands.

When Spike began to worry that he would never stop paddling, Xander suddenly quit. He placed his hands on the rim of the board next to Spike's white knuckles and he rested as the small swells and waves rolled them about. Then, Xander leaned. He kicked a foot in the water like a ship's rudder and the board responded by turning smoothly and quickly till the nose was again aimed for the distant shore.

"Hang on, Spike. Trust me and hang on tight."
The warm, excited voice in his ear was sparked with anticipation and warning. Spike nodded and it was all he could do to keep from screaming. He again felt the strain and movement of the muscles in Xander's arms and chest against Spike's back as he paddled faster and harder than before.

Suddenly, the board began to rise as a huge wave came from behind them. With the force of a freight train it lifted and shoved them forward. The ocean gushed over Spike so suddenly that, for a moment, he was unaware of Xander's weight being removed from his prone body.

"WA HOO!!!!!!"

Hearing Xander's shout of glee, Spike's eyes popped open and he saw two feet stepping and shifting on either side of him as though he were doing a well-executed dance. Straight ahead was the wild of the ocean and it felt like flying. Spike forgot how to breathe. The board rolled and sailed, skimming across the surface of God's creation at a speed too
great to estimate.

Spike forgot to be afraid as a feeling of pure joy consumed him.

He held on and held his head upright as the far-off shore rushed to meet them. All the while Xander moved with the grace of a high-wire walker, maintaining balance and control of the narrow wooden board.

All too soon, it was over. When the shallows rose up and the wave climaxed against the beach, Xander jumped from the board and into the drink as the lone rider coasted towards a sandy stop. Running to check on his passenger, Xander was shocked when Spike leapt from the board, whooped in delight and threw himself into his teacher's arms.
Part Eighteen

Xander suddenly found himself with an armload of squealing and wriggling wet boy. It was a situation made more disarming by the fact that it felt so good and comfortably right. It didn't feel anything like holding Cordelia.

He looked over Spike's shoulder in all directions to see if their physical display was causing any reaction from the crowds on the beach and he was relieved to see that, in the context of the situation, no one was paying them much mind.

Xander relaxed. He laughed as Spike babbled an endless string of adjectives and phrases, some obviously British-isms that Xander had never heard before, that all described the feeling of his first ride on the magic, flying board.

When strange, sneaky thoughts of kisses poked their heads in the doorway of Xander's brain, he gently pried Spike loose and pushed him to arm's length. The boy's face was beaming. His blue eyes
sparkled and he was unashamed in his enthusiasm and hero worship of the surf god, Xander.

Xander couldn't help but share in Spike's joy. After all, it was surfing and Xander remembered his first times. It was like discovering a whole new universe. "So, I take it you liked it?"

"Oh, Xander, it was magnificent! You are magnificent! I have never felt so free! Please, can we do it again?"

Xander rubbed his chin. His face screwed up as he gave the question serious thought before he bent down and grabbed his board from the water. "Nope."

Spike was flabbergasted. Then crushed. Then furious. He had not paid good, hard-earned money for one ride. How dare this boy show him the wonders of surfing only to snatch it all away. "What? Now see here! I have employed you to teach...."
Xander calmly dipped his board down, allowing a rushing wave to rinse the sand from it, while the boy beside him fumed. "That's right. You did not hire me to haul your skinny ass around on this board while I do all the work. You wanted to learn to surf. That means this time, I expect you to get to your feet and walk the wood."

An audible gasp preceded a violent shudder of pure joy and excitement that rattled through Spike and his grin was back. On one hand, he was certain that he couldn't do it but on the other, his trust in his mentor was unquestioning. He snapped his bare heels together and his hand came up in a sharp salute. "Yes sir!"

Xander laughed. He suspected this was going to be a long day, but he didn't care. He was surfing and, surprisingly, Spike was a companionable person to shoot the breeze as well as the waves with. With a nod, he held the board back in its initial position. This time, Spike knew what to do and he rolled on with ease.
Xander again stared up the 'Y' of the boy's open thighs to the pressed bulge between his legs and the soft swell of his butt. He couldn't, for the life of him, understand why that sight was so fascinating, but it was. He shook his head to clear it.

"OK, listen up. Same as before. We paddle out and turn. When I see a big one coming, I'll start us back. Once I get up and get the board in balance, I want you to shove with your arms like I showed you yesterday. Shift your weight to your feet and pop up as quick as you can. When you are up, I will help you balance and keep the board level. Do you want to try?"

Spike twisted his head to look around his shoulder. His face wore an expression of intense concentration and he shouted over the roar of the waves. "YES!"

Xander shoved off. Like before, he settled comfortably on Spike's back and he drove them out through the high winds and crashing waves that tried to dislodge them. This time Spike knew what
to expect. He gripped the board tightly as they cut cleanly through the swells of foam. Further and further they went until finally Xander stopped and floated. He closed his eyes as he rubbed his cheek into the wet blond curls and his lips brushed lightly over his student's ear. "Get ready. Do exactly what I taught you. Trust me, Spike. You can do it."

Spike shivered at the intimacy. His dick was hard as a rock and he didn't care. It felt as though he and Xander were the only two people left on the face of the earth and it was incredible! He turned his head quickly to answer and again their lips met. Oddly, this time, it felt like the natural response and Xander smiled.

He dipped his foot and he turned the board. With long, slow strokes, Xander expertly steered them gracefully over two small waves that lifted then dropped them gently. And they waited. The anticipation was torture. Spike felt like he may explode if it didn't happen soon and just as he was about to ask, he felt Xander's body go tense.
Just like before, Xander strained as he dipped his arms in the ocean and paddled harder. Spike's fingers locked onto the rim of the board. Within seconds, they began to rise as the ocean pushed them up from below with an unbridled energy and force. Spike braced himself as Xander shoved himself up. Peeking back through the glare of the blinding sun that reflected off the water, Spike could see Xander bent at the waist with his arms straight out to keep them balanced as the waves again splashed over, under and around them while they picked up speed.

Expertly, Xander's feet skipped back and forth instinctually. After a minute, he kicked Spike lightly on the leg as indication that it was time. Spike gulped. He was terrified to try but knew he would not let Xander down. His brain scrambled to recall all the instructions Xander had given him the day before and he knew if he was going to do this, it had to be now.

He released his hold and placed his palms under his chest. Before he could push, an errant wave
splashed him in the face causing him to spit and sputter but he would not be deterred. He hopped in a quick, smooth, rapid move that saw him positioned in a squat with his feet and hands flat on the board as Xander maintained the balance above him.

And he stood upright.

Xander immediately scooped an arm around Spike's waist and pulled the smaller boy back against him while his feet again walked the board to maintain the balance for both of them.

For a good ten seconds that felt like years, Spike was up. His arms were extended and the world spun around him. He rode the crest of the ocean like Poseidon himself, master of the seas. He whooped in triumph. He shouted in delight at the mind-blowing experience and, just when he thought he had defeated the power of the Pacific, his foot slipped and they both went down.

Four arms and four legs flailed wildly before being
dragged under the surface of the water as the surfboard flipped into the air and followed them down. Xander had been expecting it. Truth was, he was pleasantly surprised that Spike had gotten up at all. It wasn't a big deal. Over the years, he had swamped hundreds of times. The only concern was quickly getting your head back up and avoiding getting bonked by the tumbling board in the process.

In seconds, he located Spike and he grabbed for him. The boy was already kicking and together they held hands tightly and pumped their legs driving them upward till finally they popped out and began sucking in precious oxygen as the ocean did its best to pull them back down.

"Woo hoo! Hot damn! That was bitchin'!"

Spike snorted salt water out his nose and laughed at Xander's excitement. He couldn't remember ever having a better time. Facing each other, the boys continued to tread water as they caught their breath. When Spike thought he could again speak
without gasping, he shouted, "Well, I thought you had better balance than that. You are quite a klutz aren't you?"

"WHAT? Why you..."

In feigned outrage, Xander pounced and the two of them rolled and splashed, swimming and bobbing like seal pups at play. Finally, willing to admit he was whipped, Xander swatted Spike on the butt and he shouted, "Swim for shore. I gotta get my board and I'll be there in a minute."

Spike nodded and hoped he had the strength left to make it.

Five minutes later, and after retrieving his board, Xander made it to the beach and he collapsed in a wet heap next to Spike where together they lay in the hot sand. Their lungs strained. Their arms and legs cramped from exertion and their hearts felt ready to explode. It was great!

When recovery seemed assured, Xander turned his
head to the side and looked at his companion. "Want to try again?"

Spike opened his eyes and faced his teacher with a smile. "Hell yes!"

**Part Nineteen**

By late afternoon, they were hot, exhausted and waterlogged. They had spent hours battling the waves in an effort to teach Spike the skills and agility needed to defeat the Pacific Ocean.

According to Xander, Spike was making glowing progress. Spike was not so sure but one thing was certain, the practice was wonderful. It was unlimited touching, rubbing, and the pressing together of their nearly naked, wet bodies.

And it was fun. Xander was smart, with a quick wit
that was tinged with sarcasm and dry humor. He kept Spike in stitches.

Xander, too, had to admit that he was having a great time. Spike was easy-going and eager to learn. He took criticism well and when Xander corrected him on his technique, Spike made the adjustments easily. Although Spike couldn't see it, Xander was amazed at how well his student was doing.

"I think that's enough for today. We don't want to keep going when we're tired and risk an accident. Besides, I'm hungry as fuck. Why don't we meet back here tomorrow?"

"Must we? Well, yes, I suppose we must."

Spike knew what Xander was saying was right. His muscles ached and cramped at the very thought of going back out and fighting the current again. Still, he hated to part. He wanted to stay with Xander all day. Suddenly, a possible way to do that sprang to mind.
"I'm starved too. Saaay, I have a proposal. Why don't we go to my place? It's only a few blocks from here. There's no one home and we have quite a bit of ham in the cooler from Sunday dinner. I could make us ham sandwiches. Do you like ham sandwiches?"

Xander shook water from his hair like a dog and he grinned. "Hell yeah, I love the little fuckers. Let's go!"

Spike whooped with excitement as he scooped up his clothes and towel. Xander did the same, being careful to tuck his money in his clothes wrap before hoisting his board and leading the way off the beach.

The trip was comfortable. Xander carried his board while Spike walked alongside with his bike. Like long-lost friends, they chatted comfortably as the streets passed and the few short blocks to Spike's house disappeared beneath their feet. Within minutes, Spike stopped.
"Well, this is it. When we go in, you must forgive the clutter. We're still just settling in and living out of boxes."

Xander held on to his board and studied the house as a low, slow whistle left his pursed lips. "Wow! Neato pad. Your old man must make some serious clams working down at the college. Big bucks in the brain-game, huh?."

Spike just shrugged and pushed his bicycle into the garage. Xander followed and propped his board up next to it.

"Yeah, it's bigger than our place in London. Come on in."

Spike held open the door that led from the garage into the kitchen but, when he turned around, Xander was holding back. "Gees, I better not. The sun dried most of me but my trunks are still soaking wet. I got some clothes in my towel, I'll just change quick so I don't leave little puddles in the house."
Spike looked at Xander's warm, glistening, brown skin. The tiny flecks of sand that adhered to his muscular arms sparkled like diamonds and Spike wondered if he dared do what he was thinking. He licked his lips and smiled innocently deciding why the hell not. "No problem. I'm wet too. Come on, we can go up to my room and change before I fix lunch."

To Xander, a jock who had spent endless hours in sports locker rooms with the other guys on his teams, it seemed like a reasonable solution. He was comfortable with group nudity so he grabbed his towel and, with no reservations, he grinned and kicked off his gritty sandals by the doorway.

"Lead the way."

Together, the boys laughed as they darted through the kitchen and ran across the living room. Their bare feet slapped on the hardwood floors as they rounded the landing, grabbed the banister and leapt up the steps two at a time. As they went,
Xander noted that the house was large and although they had only been there a few days, it felt comfortable and lived in.

At the top of the stairs, Spike lurched to the left and into what was now his room. Xander skidded to a stop, looked all around in surprise and then burst out laughing. Spike immediately knew what the joke was and he pretended to be angry. He put his fists on his hips and he scowled. "What? You don't like the purple walls? I'll have you know that I spent hours picking out exactly the right shade for this room and I don't appreciate...."

Xander was horrified that he had insulted his new friend. The color had hit him as so bizarre that it never occurred to him that Spike took pride in it and that he had hurt his feelings. "Oh. Shit, Spike, I'm sorry. No. It's great. It's, um, really......"

"Putrid?"

"Huh?"
"It's grotesque, Xander. It's disgusting and totally queer. Da said I can repaint next week. Had you going there for a minute didn't I?"

Xander's mouth fell open. He had been had and he couldn't even get mad. Spike was obviously delighted. His eyes twinkled and his whole face was lit up in amusement. Xander paused for half a beat then he snatched the pillow off Spike's bed and swatted him in the head, knocking a laughing Spike off balance and onto his mattress.

"Stop! Stop! I'll get my bed wet and I'll have to sleep on damp sheets!" Immediately, Spike jumped back up and, in a surprisingly sudden move, he grabbed his swim trunks with both hands and jerked them down. When they hit the floor with a 'splat' he stepped out and kicked them to the side.

Xander was stunned. Not by the move, because changing their clothes was exactly what they had come here to do. No, what threw him totally off kilter was his reaction to it. He stared. He couldn't help it.
Spike was beautiful. His skin was soft and pale. Xander had earlier thought of the boy as feminine but now knew that that was an adjective that would never again enter his mind. Although he seemed small and physically immature when he was clothed, naked, Spike's muscles were strong and well defined. His body hair was fine and nearly invisible. A direct contrast to Xander, whose hair was coarse and dark on both his arms and legs. And 'down there.'

Unaware of his blatant ogling, Xander's eyes scanned the top of Spike's head, down to his chest. When his line of sight reached Spike's stomach, Xander's breathing quickened. His eyes blinked rapidly as they slowly, shamefully, almost physically slid further south.

There it was. Spike's dick. Xander couldn't look away. It was as if it was the first dick Xander had ever seen. It was amazing. It was wonderful. Long, slim, pink and.... Oh, God! Uncut! All of the boys Xander knew were born in Sunnydale hospital and,
like him, snipped off at the second day of life. Tony used to joke that his son was nine pounds at birth and eight pounds after the circumcision.

Spike's was not cut. It had a hood that concealed the fat, round head. It made it look relaxed. Primeval. Raw and different as it hung down, almost as if it were waiting for something. For someone. For.... NO. Xander wouldn't think it.

Over the years he had seen at least a hundred dicks swinging around the locker rooms, and none of them had caught his interest like this one. He felt flushed and warm as he remembered him and Spike rolling and playing together in the ocean just an hour ago. His body had been pressed against this.

Xander was lightheaded. He swallowed around the knot in his throat yet he made no effort to look away. It was confusing. It was startling. It was causing a tingle and a twitch in his own swimmers that he recognized, and suddenly he gasped. His eyes snapped up to Spike's smiling face and Xander was immediately jolted with embarrassment.
Spike, on the other hand, was overjoyed. This was an unexpected delight that he never saw coming. Xander was like him! Oh, he was sure the bigger boy didn't know it yet, but Spike knew and for now, that was enough.

When he brought Xander up here to change, he was hoping for a peek. A look, no matter how brief, of the end of that dark trail of tummy hair that Spike just knew would lead, like a rainbow, to Xander's pot-of-gold treasure. But this had been better. He could almost feel Xander's eyes, like wisps of fingertips lightly brushing over Spike's skin, setting it on fire and leaving a scorched line in its wake.

Spike watched Xander, and the way he stared took Spike's breath away. Not even Wes had ever looked at him like that. It caused Spike's stomach to squiggle and his dick to threaten to stand and wave at his new admirer. And that was something Spike could not let happen. It might scare off the prey. The mouse was definitely interested in the cheese, so the trap must not snap too soon for fear of
scaring him off.

Casually, as though nothing unusual had happened, Spike grabbed some boxers, shorts and a tee out of his drawer and he quickly tugged them on.

"Hey, while you dress I'll go fix our sandwiches. If you need the bathroom, it's in there."

Xander remained speechless. He waited while Spike skipped from the room, then he looked down at the grotesquely tented front of his trunks. Yeah, he would be needing the bathroom.

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**Part Twenty**

"What the fuck, Xander. I mean seriously, what the fuck?"

Xander mumbled to himself in low, confused tones
as he stared at the blobs of white stringy release that floated in the water of Spike's toilet bowl. Had he just jerked off to the thought of his new buddy's body? A male body? One with a peter and balls and stuff? Xander shook the last drops into the bowl with a 'plip-plop' and he tugged on his dry shorts.

"Nah. Must have been a fluke. Waaait a minute. Wasn't there a similar fluke yesterday when his mouth accidently fell onto me? You know what? No, Xander! Stop right there. OK, the best way to deal with this is just not think about it."

Xander nodded in agreement with himself and he pulled on his tee. He then took a minute to peer in the bathroom mirror and comb his hair, smoothing it back into a slick, pointy D.A.

There was no sense in looking like a scuzz-bucket for his new friend. It was a concept that made him chuckle. He never gave two hoots about how he looked for Cordelia and now he was worried about giving off geek vibes.
When he was satisfied with his appearance, Xander rushed downstairs.

"Hey, there you are. I was afraid maybe you had fallen in and couldn't surf your way out of the bathroom."

Xander rolled his eyes, but had to admit Spike's humor and accent were pretty damn cute. He looked all around. The kitchen was bright, clean and sparse. Where his own mother always had pots of flowers and decorative chickens sitting around the window sills and countertops, this one was void of all frilly decorations. Xander wondered if it was because they were not yet fully moved in or because of the lack of a female presence. Either way, he liked it.

"Ha fucking ha. You're a regular Jerry Lewis comedian. So where's my sandwich? Did you put mustard on it, and how about some milk to go with?"

Spike hustled around the kitchen. His bare feet
danced happily as he catered to his pretend boyfriend. He set down their plates and glasses before taking his seat, and together they dove in. They laughed and talked as they ate, reliving the morning's lesson. They compared opinions on the waves and the progress Spike was making and both came to the conclusion that by the end of the month, Spike would be riding the waves like a champ.

At some time during the second sandwich, Spike's swinging feet glanced off Xander's and a toe wrestling under the table began. It felt silly, flirty, and Xander could never remember acting so foolish, but he couldn't help himself. Each touch of Spike's skin against him sent tickles throughout his body and overwhelmed him with an absurd urge to toss Spike to the floor and wrestle him till the smaller boy cried 'uncle.'

In fact, he was so caught up in the teasing and game-playing that he never heard the car pull into the garage until the kitchen door unexpectedly swung open.
"Well, hello. Who do we have here?"

Xander immediately stopped playing. His face snapped around and he was startled by the sudden appearance of the tall, thin, neatly dressed gentleman. He knew instantly who he must be and Xander responded to the strange man's presence with a blush of guilt, although he wasn't sure what sin he had committed.

Truth was, he was almost grateful that Spike's father had shown up when he had, as Xander realized he was on the brink of doing something physical and over the line. Something that Spike would never have understood or forgiven. Something that Xander himself did not understand.

He was totally confounded by this compulsion to touch Spike, but thanked God he was stopped in time. He wouldn't want his new friend to think he was a perv.

Spike, on the other hand, was as bright and cheery
as always. He was thrilled by his father's arrival and acted completely oblivious to Xander's inner conflict. "Da. Hello. This is Xander, the friend that I told you about. He's the one who is teaching me how to surf. We were hungry, so I invited him home for lunch."

Rupert was delighted that his son had found a friend. He had had serious concerns and suspicions about the boy's relationship with young Wesley back in London, and Rupert was very relieved to see he had formed a friendship with a boy so clearly athletic and masculine. The Colonies were proving to be the fresh start he had hoped for. "Excellent. Wonderful. Welcome, Xander. I must say, I was a bit anxious at young William's interest in learning such a perilous activity, but I can see that he is in good hands with you."

Xander accepted Rupert's handshake and tried not to blush at the thought of having young William in his hands. "Thank you, sir. I will do my best. Spike, um, William, is a real good student. He's a strong swimmer and he's learning fast."
Rupert glanced down at his right hand which was still being enthusiastically pumped by the nervously babbling boy. He gently gripped the boy's wrist to stop the motion and he extricated his own hand from the iron clutch. The boy, Xander, seemed nice enough, however Rupert decided that he simply never would understand today's generation. "Yes, well, that's lovely. Now, if you boys will excuse me, I will be in my study. I have some lesson plans to prepare for my classes. It was very nice to meet you, Xander. Please feel free to stop by anytime. Oh, and William, if anyone calls or stops by, I would appreciate if you told them I was not home. Anyone! Understand?"

"Oh, sure Da. No problem. No one will get past me. I promise."

Both boys watched as Rupert Giles left the room through the swinging kitchen door. When he was gone, Spike turned back around. His face was beaming. His father liked Xander. Really liked him. Spike could tell, and his father's approval was
important to him. "My Da likes you."

"Keen. Look, I gotta go."

Xander jumped to his feet. He had just maxed out on weird for the day and he needed to put some space between himself and all these new feelings, ideas, and situations he was suddenly engrossed in. He felt like he was wading through the Twilight Zone. He needed normal again.

Spike jumped up too. He didn't know what had just happened to burst their happy bubble but he feared that if Xander left now, they would never get back to this place again. He desperately tried to think of some way to spend more time with him. Suddenly, it came to him.

"Hey, do you like movies? I just love the cinema. I used to go all the time with my friend, Wes. When we drove through town, I noticed that you have a film house and it's showing the newest Tommy Sands film, The Monkey's Uncle. I don't suppose you would want to go, would you?"
For a brief flash, Xander's brain whispered, 'Is this a date?' but he quickly squelched the idea as absurd. Guys hung out together all the time. That's all this was. Hanging out. Besides, he had been wanting to see that flick, too, just not with Cordelia draped all over him. "Hell, yeah. That sounds boss. We can skim by, peep the pic and then bug out to the diner for a dead cow and a shake. Hey, I'll bet my mom would even let me use her wheels for the night."

Spike wrapped his arms around his own waist to keep himself grounded. He was afraid if he let go, he might just float up, up and away like a big helium balloon full of hot air, joy and anticipation. On the outside, he kept a deceptively calm smile on his face. "That sounds great! Oh, if something happens that you can't come, my phone number is 72637. Do you need to write it down?"

Xander shook his head. The numbers were burned into his brain and he knew nothing short of an A-bomb dropped by the Red Commies would dislodge it. Oddly reluctant to leave, Xander stood on the
threshold of the kitchen/garage and he stared into the clear blue eyes and wonderful, smiling face. Finally he realized if he didn't split now, Spike would think Xander was buggin' and he might change his mind about the movie. Strangly, seeing Annette and Tommy play with a chimp became very important to Xander. "OK, then. I'm gonna go. I'll take my board home and get cleaned up. The movie starts at seven, so how about I pick you up around six-thirty?"

Spike giggled. "Sounds perfect. I can't wait."

Slowly, Xander backed out of the house. The big grin on his face was cemented in place and his arms swung aimlessly at his sides. When his ass bumped into the Ford Fairlane that was not there earlier, he stumbled and nearly fell. He ducked his head in embarrassment, grabbed his board and hurried away.

Spike stayed where he was. He watched as Xander hoisted the heavy board under his arm as though it were weightless and he sighed at the sight of his
jock's muscled arms and legs. He stayed long after Xander turned left and there was nothing left to see. He grinned happily, and when Jenny Calendar rounded the corner of the house and asked if his father was home, he absentmindedly waved his hand toward the house, signaling she should go on in and find him.

He and Xander had a date.

**Part Twenty-One**

Xander was inexplicably nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. He took an extra-long shower, which included a fast jerk-off, and scrubbed everything from his hair to between his toes. After a rough dry-off, he slathered his hair with Brylcreem, disregarding their claims that a little dab would do him, and he smoothed it back into its best D.A.

Then it was time to dress.
He trotted naked into his bedroom and stood in front of his closet and quickly came to the conclusion that he had nothing to wear. Oh, he had plenty of garish, flowered shirts as well as older, worn tees, but nothing was right for a night at the movies. Which was bizarre. He took Cordelia to the picture shows all the time. He scratched his head and tried to recall what he wore when he went with her. He came up a blank.

He then tried to reason with himself and took the mental path that this was just two buddies hanging out for a night. He was totally confounded by the anxiety and obsession that surrounded what should be nothing more than a few hours of flick and feed. Why the hell was he wiggin'?

"Oh, fuck. Just get fucking dressed and quit acting like a girl."

The self-admonishing gave him perspective. He pulled on some clean jeans and a plaid button down. Then changed to a tee. Then changed back to the shirt. Then screamed in frustration. Just as he
was about to pull the A from his D.A., Xander heard the phone ring downstairs and his mother called.

"Xanny! Telephone!"

Xander bolted down the steps. The dread in his stomach told him that it was Spike and that their evening out was about to go down the toilet. Reluctantly, he picked up the heavy handset.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Baby, I haven't heard from you all day. How did your little lesson go today? Oh, I was just talking to Buffy and we're double-dating tonight with her and Riley. We were thinking of hanging at the Skate Place. Now, don't start crying money. It's my treat. You drive and I'll pay for...."

"Cordy, no, sorry, I can't. See, um, it's ....Mom! That's it. Mom has been under the weather all day and I promised to run to the store and get some pills for her. Then I just couldn't leave her. No, I'm going to have to stay in tonight. Boy, that really
sucks. A night rolling around the floor with you and the gang would be bitchin', but you go ahead and have a great time."

"Oh. Gee, I really don't want to...."

"Oh, I insist! There's no sense in you sitting home too. So, have a great time. Talk to you tomorrow. Toodles."

Before Cordelia could voice the thousand and one arguments and suggestions that were forming on her tongue, she found herself holding a dead line. She should be angry. She should have been insulted, but the emotion that she had been feeling lately was fear. She was losing him. He was slipping away and she had no idea why.

Thirty minutes later, Xander pulled his mother's car up into the driveway of the Giles' residence. His stomach was full of butterflies and his fingers tapped the steering wheel nervously. Should he honk the horn? Should he go to the door and call for him? Before he could make the decision, the
door flew open and Spike came charging out.

He jerked the door open and dropped down into the passenger's seat. When he did, for Xander, everything fell comfortably into place.

"Hi! So, is this your mom's car? Wow, it sure is keen! Look how big the backseat is."

Spike was on his knees perched backwards on the front seat. He hung over the headrest, totally unaware that Xander was staring at the small, round butt that waggled just inches from his face. Finally, fear of being caught forced his gaze away. Instead, he playfully threw the car into reverse and stomped down on gas, causing Spike to tumble over and land in a heap on the seat beside him.

"Hey!"

In retaliation, Spike's hands swatted at the driver in a flurry of slaps as he tried to right himself, and they both hooted with laughter. When they hit the
street, Xander laid rubber and they screeched off into the night.

~*~*~*~*~

"How many?"

The bored woman sat in her small cage and asked the same question, repeated a hundred times every night. She had a National Geographic on her lap and a cigarette between her fingers. Her name tag read 'Evelyn' and her face read 'jaded.'

Both boys reached into their pockets, but Xander placed a hand on Spike's arm. "I'll pay this time. You can treat next. Two please."

Evelyn accepted the two dollars that were slid to her by the bigger boy, and she pushed back two orange ticket stubs before taking a drag on her Marlboro and returning to the article on the pyramids.
Without thinking about it, Xander placed his palm on the small of Spike's back and steered him into the lobby, where he handed over the stubs and they proceeded into the darkened room. By mutual agreement, they picked seats in the back and settled in.

First up was a Three Stooges short. It quickly became a pattern that each time Moe would slap Larry on the head, Spike would do the same to Xander. Xander responded by grabbing the bony wrist and the two tussled in their seats. The third time earned them a flashlight beam in the face and a warning by the usher that they would be tossed out if they didn't behave. Both boys vowed, through giggles and snorts, to be on their best behavior.

The next ninety minutes were the strangest and most wonderful of Xander's life. While Tommy and Annette fell in love on the screen as they dealt with the comic antics of a chimp, Spike and Xander were acting out a short story of their own in the back row of the theatre.
They shared a tub of buttery popcorn, bumping hands and noisily sucking their greasy fingers. They each tested the boundaries by pressing their knees and thighs against the heated one next to them. When something funny occurred onscreen, they would nudge shoulders or poke ribs, using any excuse to be as physical as possible.

Xander counted on the concealment of the darkened theatre to sneak glances at the boy beside him. Spike's profile was amazing. His soft, curly blond hair just begged to be touched as Xander imagined running his fingers through it, getting tangled in it and tugging the boy's scalp in an effort to pull free.

His nose was small with a slight upturn on the end and his lips, oh, holy mother, his lips. Xander's fingertips brushed over his own mouth as he recalled their accidental kiss in his garage and he couldn't help but wonder what an intentional smooch would be like.

Throughout all of this, Spike kept his face straight
ahead. He laughed at the appropriate times and he pretended to be following the plot of the movie with intense concentration. In truth, he had no idea if Annette was about to boink Tommy or the chimp.

No, all he was really aware of was the heated attention of the sexy, handsome boy beside him. He could almost feel Xander's eyes crawling over his skin and examining him so fervently he half-expected to find a hickey in the morning. It was heated and passionate. It squirmed in Spike's belly and it tugged at the dick in his jeans.

Spike didn't trust himself to turn and face his examiner. It had become overwhelming. His breathing was quick and shallow. His heart rate escalated and Spike feared if the movie didn't end soon, both of his heads may explode and cause the usher to return with his revealing, embarrassing beam of light.

Instead, Spike did the unthinkable. He took a giant leap of faith.
With his eyes still seemingly focused on the screen, he tentatively reached his hand over and he entwined his fingers with Xander's.

He heard the boy beside him gasp. It was the moment of truth and Spike waited for the repercussions. Would Xander curse him and shove him away? Was this the end of a short friendship? He had made his move and now he waited.

Xander blinked in astonishment. He looked down at the small hand that was clasped with his and resting on his thigh. He shook his head to clear his mind and tried to comprehend what he was seeing and feeling. They were holding hands. Goddamn if they weren't holding hands.

It was nothing like the annoying intrusive feeling when Cordelia grabbed and latched onto him. Her fingernails were long, fake paste-ons and he had complained more than once that they cut into his skin. Her grip made his palms sweat uncomfortably, and he used any excuse to extricate himself.
This was...different. *Holy fuck! We're holding hands!* His brain simply couldn't grasp the obvious no matter how long he stared at it. The one thing he didn't do was stop. When he finally came to the conclusion that this wasn't something that could be resolved through deep thought, Xander relaxed and turned back to the screen in time to see the chimp swing from the tree and muss up the mountain of hair on Annette's head.

Both boys laughed and Xander's thumb slowly brushed across the back of Spike's hand.

**Part Twenty-Two**

The joint was jumpin'!

Even though the calendar said that it was midweek, the arrival of summer vacation set every night as a weekend for the teens of Sunnydale High and it saw
a boom in business for the Chatterbox Diner.

It was a loud ruckus of shouting orders for burger platters and the constant burst of laughter from random jokes and conversations. It was overcrowded with bodies pressed together, making their way from table to table to visit, swipe french fries and share gossip. And it was hot. Steamy. The only air moving was from the slow, antiquated ceiling fan perched in the center of the diner and the heat in the room was the perfect excuse for wearing tube tops and short shorts.

The setting sun had done little to cool the temperatures in Southern California.

Perched just inside the front door was the centerpiece of every night's entertainment. The jukebox.

Its brightly colored flashing lights coaxed the teens to give up their quarters in exchange for three minutes of musical pleasure. It was the thrill of hearing your coin clatter into the slot and it was the
intense moment of decision-making that followed.

Was it to be B-14 or H-21? Someone from one of the booths called for C-11, but that was old hat. Finally, with the choice made, they all watched as the black vinyl disk dropped onto the turntable. Then when the needle hit the groove, the room came alive with the beat that set all their feet to dancing and their fingers snapping.

This was Xander's world. He belonged to it as much as it belonged to him. A situation evident by the response that rose up from the crowd when he and Spike entered through the front door.

"Xan!"

"Hey, Xan.

What's shakin?"

"Xander, over here."

"Hey, there's Xan!"
Xander raised his arm, gave a smile or a nod as he responded to each acknowledgment, but he made no move towards the caller. Instead, he headed towards an open booth in the far corner. Spike was right behind him, beaming with pride to be with the most popular and handsome boy in Sunnydale.

When Xander slid into the booth, he scooted over and Spike dropped down beside him. Within minutes, Laverne zipped over and snatched the pencil from her beehive. She poised it above her pad, cracked her gum and waited impatiently. Xander sucked his teeth for a moment as he thought before ordering for them both. "Bring us a couple Big Boy Baskets, fries and a couple cherry Cokes."

Laverne was gone in a zip and Spike grinned at the prospect of being taken care of.

At the end of the movie, the lights had come up and their hands let go. Neither of them had mentioned it since. It was the type of situation girls
would have examined and talked to death. Guys, not so much, although Spike would have liked to discuss it just a little.

Xander fiddled nervously with his paper napkin and tried to think of something to say that would stop things before they got weird.

Spike broke the ice. "I really liked the movie."

Xander turned his face to answer him and was again struck by the sweet smile and wonderful blue eyes. He immediately relaxed and laughed. "Yeah, it was neat. Best part was the monkey."

Both boys laughed as though the movie was the funniest thing they had ever seen and somehow a private joke just between the two of them. As they did, the unease melted away and they were back to being comfortable together.

With their faces close together and their voices low, Xander's hand itched. He wished he could reach out and take Spike's again but knew it was out of the
question. Things that are acceptable in the dark, sometimes have no place in the light.

Within minutes, Laverne sailed past and dropped a couple red plastic baskets full of hot, greasy food in front of them with two bottles of soda on the side, and the boys dove in. They chewed happily and from time to time, Xander would offer Spike a fry. Sometimes he let him eat it and sometimes he would, at the last minute, playfully snatch it back and pop it in his own mouth. It was a game that, each time, elicited an outraged giggle and laugh from Spike as though it were totally unexpected.

"Xan? Hey, come on ya'll, Xan and Spike are here."

Before they knew what hit them, the booth was packed and their food confiscated. Buffy plopped down beside Spike, shoving him against Xander and Xander against the window. Directly across from them were Riley, Willow and a confused, scowling Cordelia. Buffy shoved a couple fries in her mouth and reached for Xander's Coke to wash them down.
"Wow, what crazy luck running into you guys here. Cordy said you were staying in tonight. Said your old lady was ailing. What happen? She bug out and you booked?"

Xander glanced over at Spike imploring him not to mention Tommy, Annette or a dressed-up monkey but then realized that squished in like they were, Spike was all but sitting on his lap. Xander tried to think but the words got lost somewhere between his brain and his mouth and the only thing that presented itself as important was the fact that for a small body, Spike sure gave off a lot of heat.

"Um, better. Moms is better. I think it was like snake bite or food poisoning or stuff like that."

Spike immediately picked up the ball and ran with it, heading for the goal line. "Yes, I ran into Xander at the pharmacist and since they were all out of snake bite creme we decided to come over here and have a bit of a snack while they mixed more up. Tricky stuff, that. It can't be hurried."
He then grinned with pride at his quick wit and logical excuse. Uninterested, Riley turned in his seat and signaled to Laverne. Buffy shrugged at the reasonable answer and only Cordelia raised an eyebrow of questioning concern.

"So if you decided to go out, why didn't you call me?"

Cordelia's radar was beeping wildly as she looked back and forth between Spike and Xander. She had no idea what was going on but she was determined to find out and she had a gut feeling she wasn't going to like the answer. Her first thought was that maybe they had gone somewhere and met a couple girls. She strummed her fingers on the tabletop as she waited for an answer.

Xander flopped his left arm over the back of the booth and propped his right elbow up on the table as he prepared his explanation. "Oh, well, ACK!"

Just as he had begun to spin a white lie web, Spike had casually reached over beneath the table and
slid his hand up the inside of Xander's thigh, stopping mere inches from the forbidden zone.

Willow reached across the table and grabbed Xander's hand in concern. "What? What's wrong, Sweetie? You sound like you're choked. Do you need water?"

Xander glared in shock at the sweet, calm, unassuming face that sat beside him and still gripped him near the crotch. He could tell Spike was not letting go and the worst part was that apparently his dick didn't want him to.

"What? No, sorry. I must have swallowed a fry down the wrong pipe. Um, what were we talking about?"

"Your mother, Xander. We were discussing your snake-bitten mother. The woman who already considers me her daughter-in-law. The woman who...."

Riley could see Cordelia was about to launch into a
mammoth tirade that he knew none of them but her was interested in hearing, and the fact was, he had serious business to discuss with Xander. "Yeah, yeah, don't have a cow, Cordy. Look, why don't you chicks go powder something. I need to talk to my man here."

With no further encouragement needed, the three girls shoved and climbed their way out of the booth and headed for the bathroom. When they were out of sight, Riley immediately dove into his rear pocket and pulled out a flyer that he uncrinkled and shoved across the table.

Spike, who had made no move to scoot over to the now-vacated space, drew the paper over and he and Xander studied it carefully. The heading read:

SURFING COMPETITION! GRAND PRIZE FOR FIRST PLACE - $500.00.

Xander's eyes bugged wide and Spike let out a whistle. Xander pulled it close and scanned the page for the details. "It says here it's for teams of two."
Riley leaned close, careful not to be overheard. "Right. You and me. Come on, Xan, you know there's no one that can beat us and together we're a sure thing. That breaks down to $250.00 apiece. Now I ain't said nothing to Buff or Cordy cause if I do, shit, they'll have the money spent before it even reaches our pockets. So, whatta ya say? We in?"

For Xander, the woody was all but parked in his drive. He stuck out his hand to shake. "Fuck yes, I'm in."

Part Twenty-Three

Tony Harris sat in the darkened living room slumped down in his favorite easy chair. He had his feet propped up on the needlepoint ottoman and he had a cooling cup of coffee in his hand. His eyes were glued to the television as Walter Cronkite told
America what was happening in the world around them.

"You hear that, Jess?"

His wife, Jessica, puttered around in the kitchen during the hour that the depressing news was on the television. She had long ago come to the conclusion that since there was nothing that she personally could do about the condition of things, why sit each night and stare at a screen that fed horrifying images into their home.

"What? Oh, sorry, Hon, I was looking through the card box for that dumpling recipe I used to have. I know it was...."

"Cronkite says that LBJ is asking Congress for the money to escalate the war. He wants to send as many troops as he can over there and kick this fucking military action into high gear. I'm tellin' ya, Jess, this fucking war is a big mistake. If Castro hadn't had JFK killed he would have us outta this mess by now."
Jessica stood in the kitchen with her back to the sink. Her stomach churned and she prayed that her husband would just shut the hell up. She had her hands clamped tightly over her ears and tears in her eyes. Jessica Harris had a son on the verge of his eighteenth birthday.

~*~*~*~*~

"God damn, Ri. Do you really think we have a chance? Shit, I hear they bring in ringers for these things. Pros that surf the big waves in Hawaii."

Riley leaned over the table, as close to Xander as he could, as his hands slapped the flyer between them. His eyes were wide with determination and solid conviction.

"Fuck them ringers. We're as good as them and this is just like football. We got home field advantage! Waves everywhere are different. Them pros might be hot shit in Hawaii but we know the waves here."
Besides, it's being sponsored by Brown Bodies, that new suntan oil company. It's for publicity. They don't want no big names, says right here, they want California surfers. Whoever wins not only gets the money but they get their faces on one of them commercials. I want that, Xan. I want to be on one of them magazine adverts. Buffy would be fucking crazy about me if I was fucking famous."

Caught up in this new excitement, Spike had released his grip on Xander's thigh and instead, his hand now rested on his companion's shoulder. "Xan, this is perfect for you. No one can surf like you do. This is enough money for you to pay off the car and still have the rest of the summer left."

Xander didn't need convincing. It was a no-brainer. Besides, as a natural competitor, he had to give it all he had, and if he didn't win, he at least tried. He again read the rules at the bottom and his mind had already shifted into planning mode. "OK, it says we each have to take two rides separately and they combine our scores. Then we have to shoot one wave at the same time and they score us on how
well we control the boards, giving us extra points for riding as close to each other as possible, and the last ride is tandem. Both of us on the same board. Shit, Ri, this is all stuff we do every day. With a little practice, I don't see how we can lose. Damn, no offense man, but our only problem is that cracked board of yours."

Riley sat back in the booth. He had a shit-eating grin on his face and a knowing arch to his right eyebrow. "Yeah, that would have been a problemo. Luckily, it's not. You know last week was my birthday, wel...."

Xander flinched. He rubbed his hand over the back of his neck and squirmed. "Yeah, sorry about that. I didn't forget. Really. I meant to...."

Riley flipped his hand in the air. "Fuck it. We're cool. Anyway, my grampa got me that new board I been beggin' and hintin' at for the last year. And baby, it is bitchin! Come on. It's strapped to the top of my car. Come on and see."
Xander all but shoved Spike out of the way in his excitement to get out of the booth. At the last second he stopped and turned around. "Oh, shit, the girls."

Spike slid back into the seat and gave the 'shoo shoo' motions to his date. "Go on. I'll wait for them and tell them where you are. Shit, you'll probably be back before they are anyway. Especially if they're doing their hair."

With that, Xander and Riley disappeared out the door while Spike idly read the flyer to help pass the time.

"Well, well, who have we here? And all alone. What's the matter, cutie? Your new playmates leave you behind? And speaking of your behind...."

Spike looked up and before he had time to respond, the boy slid in beside him. Right beside him. Their legs were pressed together from knee to hip as Spike scrambled to move over. All the time his brain was searching for the name. When it was clearly not
going to come, a slight look of disappointment crossed the other boy's face.

"Penn. My name's Penn. You're Spike. I've seen you around. On the beach, in here and you're always with Harris. You and him got something going on?"

Spike rolled his eyes in disgust. Even back home in England he had known boys like this. Aching and hungry to walk on the wrong side of the playground but fearful of the repercussions. They wanted someone to lead them, coax them, take them there and then afterwards, if they were caught or reality slapped them in the face, they were free to claim they had been forced or molested. Until the next time when the urges again swept them away.

"The only thing we have going on is lessons. Xander is teaching me to surf."

Penn's face lit up and he scooted even closer. He stared into the beautiful face and he wanted badly to touch...something...anything on this wonderful boy. As he spoke, his eyes darted between Spike's
baby blues and his soft pink lips. Penn's voice was little more than a whisper but full of intensity and need.

"I'll teach you! I can surf just as good as Harris. Let me show you. Give me a chance. Meet me at...."

"HEY! What the fuck are you doing here? OUT! OUT!"

Spike craned around past the face that was waaay too near and he was overwhelmed with relief at the sight of the girls. All three stood with their hands on their hips and matching frowns on their faces. Stepping away from the other two, Willow latched onto Penn's ear and she tugged him painfully out of his area of encroachment.

"Ow, ow, damn it! Let go! That's a fucking assault! We were just fucking talking! Damn! He asked me to sit down."

"I did no such thing!"
Spike had also jumped up and stood facing off with his accusor. None of the girls thought for a minute that Spike had invited a Franklyn slag to sit in a Sunnydale booth. It was simply inconceivable.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON HERE?"

By now, the scuffle and the profanity had caught the attention of most of the teens in the Chatterbox and Laverne was already on her way over to act as bouncer if needed. But when Xander's voice boomed above the sound of the Beatles on the jukebox, silence filled the diner and every head snapped in their direction.

Willow stopped where she stood. She was still not relinquishing her iron grip on Penn's ear and he continued to flinch and grimace as he tried to pry her bony fingers off of him. He was almost relieved to see that Harris had arrived.

"Damn, Harris make her let go before I call the fucking cops. I wasn't doing a fucking thing. Me and Spike was just talking. You fuckers don't own this
diner. This is the United States of fucking America. I'm free to go wherever I want. This ain't no Commie state."

Xander looked around and took it all in while Penn continued to ramble. There didn't seem to be any harm done and, more importantly, Spike was all right. Calmly, Xander slipped into the booth and took a suck on his straw. His swallowed the last of his Coke and made an empty 'braaaak' sound as he continued to waggle his straw against the bottom of an empty glass. He finally belched and looked up. "Let him go Willow. We can't blame Penn for wanting to be one of us. After all, being a Franklyn must be worse than having the clap."

The entire diner gave a whoop of laughter, clapped, and the tension in the diner disappeared. The rest of the crowd immediately lost interest in the small play that had just been acted out and they all returned to their own business and conversations.

The six friends then piled back into the booth and disregarded the boy who was still standing there,
rubbing his earlobe. Glancing down, he caught sight of the flyer just as Xander snatched it from the table and stuck it in his pocket. At the last second, Spike looked up and Penn winked.

Part Twenty-Four

Although it was nearly 11 PM, the interior of Jessica Harris's Ford Fairlane was so charged with energy, Spike was surprised the dome light wasn't glowing from the overflow. Since leaving the Chatterbox, Xander had excitedly babbled nonstop about the competition.

He snapped back and forth between doubts and confidences, between concerns and assurances. He told how he and Riley had learned to swim together as small children and laughed as he said they had each nearly drowned trying to outdo each other their first summer attempting to surf.
Finally, and all too soon, they pulled up in front of the Giles house and Xander turned the key off. When he did, all fell silent. The rumble of the engine shut down and so did his nonstop litany of watery tales. For the last fifteen minutes he couldn't stop talking and now couldn't think of anything to say. Spike, too, sat wordlessly fidgeting with his shirrtail and glancing out into the night.

Neither wanted the date to end. Spike knew he should just open the door and get out, but he hated to leave.
"So, you and Riley Finn are going to be the new Brown Bodies of 1965."

Xander laughed. He wished there were some way he and Spike could stay here all night and just talk. It felt so good. It seemed so natural. "Well, I don't know about all that, but I think we really have a shot at winning. Damn, that's all the money I need for the car. And the best part is that the competition is on the 4th of July. The same day as my birthday. That has got to be a lucky omen."
Spike pretended to be uninterested but mentally filed the information away. He wanted to do something special for his new friend's birthday. He wasn't sure what, but this gave him nearly a month to decide. "So, I guess since you and Riley will be practicing, my lessons will be on hold for a while. I mean, that's OK. I don't mind. I know that...."

Xander turned around in the driver's seat, anxious to make Spike understand. "No! No, Ri and I talked about it outside when he was showing me his board and it will work out perfectly. He still has to schlepp in the garage in the mornings so you and me can practice till after lunch."

Spike was flooded with relief. He didn't care so much about the money as the fear that if Xander had no time for him, he would forget all about him. The old adage of 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' is less prevalent in teenaged boys than is 'out of sight out of mind.' Spike didn't want to be out of Xander's mind for a minute.
With nothing else to say, the silence again descended and Spike knew the night was over. "Well, it's late."

"Yeah, I guess it is."

"I better go in before my Da sends the hound of Baskerville out for me."

"Ha! I know how that is. Mom's a worrywart too."

"So, I'll see you in the morning?"

"Same time, same channel."

Spike reached for the door handle then stopped. Xander had held his hand in the movie and hadn't knocked him in the head for the naughty touching in the diner. Maybe, just maybe, it would be all right if....

Spike turned quickly in his seat and leaned in. In a flash, before Xander could give his approval or deny it, Spike kissed him. More than a peck but less than
a french, it was a moderate kiss. A tentative kiss. A questioning kiss that took only a surprised moment to be answered.

Deciding that this was not the moment for deep thought or reflection, Xander cupped the boy's face in his hands and all but climbed on him as he let the powerful urges and emotions sweep him away. With the speed of a hummingbird's wing, Spike's arms circled Xander's neck and the two boys were sealed together. Chest to chest, skin to skin.

Spike opened his mouth first and Xander's tongue tumbled in. At the first sweet taste of the warm tongues touching, Xander whimpered and tried to smash their bodies even closer. The kiss was hungry, devouring, and an odd combination of satisfying yet needy.

And the kiss went on as Xander turned, twisted, and his hips fought against the confinement of the damned steering wheel. If his brain didn't know what he wanted, his body sure did. He wanted Spike. He wanted to crawl on him and in him. He
wanted to own and possess him as he rode a wave of sexual craving so powerful it rivaled anything the Pacific had ever thrown at him.

Spike, too, was becoming a ball of sizzling frustration. As the smaller and more agile of the two, he was doing his best to climb around and straddle his companion, only to be poked painfully in the ribs by the protruding gear shifter that stuck out dangerously from the side of the steering wheel like a chastity contraption.

"Ow. Damn. Wait."

"Shit, don't move. Don't lean back or...."

BEEEEEEP!!!!

Spike's back hit the center of the wheel and set the horn off, blasting into the night and echoing through the previously silent neighborhood. What followed was a front seat of flailing arms and legs accompanied by a steady stream of, "Ouch, no, not that way, Fuck! Easy! Damn, that was my knee!"
Whoa, that was NOT your knee! Shit!"

At last, Spike tumbled into an undignified heap on the passenger's side and the horn again went mercifully silent. After a shocked pause, they both snorted and as the totality of the situation hit home, they roared with laughter.

"I gotta go before we get arrested for disturbing the peace."

Xander wiped the tears from his eyes as his hilarity melted into chuckles. He knew it was time to call it a night. "Yeah, you're right. I'll see you tomorrow on the beach. Bright and early. Don't be late."

Spike looked at Xander with eyes that sparkled and a smile that beamed. "I'll be there. Night."

Xander watched as the boy jumped from the car and hurried up the walk. He watched until Spike was safely in the front door and then he drove away, happily humming. He knew that what had just happened was strictly from Bizarro World and
would require examination, but that could wait for later. Much later.

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"Xander? That you?"

Xander dropped his mother's car keys on the side table. The house was dark except for the single-bulbed nightlight that burned 24/7 in the kitchen for midnight snacks and late night glasses of water. It was also the direction of his mother's whispered voice, so he headed in.

"Mom? What are you still doing up? I know I'm kinda late but...."

When he entered the kitchen, he saw that Jessica was holding the phone receiver. She placed her hand over the speaker end and she gave him 'the look.' "I'm up because this is the second time Cordelia has called looking for you. Are you two having a fight?"
Xander took the phone and whispered, "Sorry, Mom. No. We're fine. I'm sorry she woke you. Go on back to bed and I'll tell her again not to call this late."

Jessica nodded and Xander waited until she was out of the room and up the stairs before he spoke into the phone. "What is it, Cordy? You know you woke my mom up again."

Cordelia was unrepentant. She was mad, afraid and confused but the fact that Jessica Harris was losing sleep was not on her list of concerns. "I want to know what's going on, Xander, and don't you dare tell me nothing. You have been acting funny for weeks. You have been cold and distant and I want to know why. Are you... Are you trying to break up with me?"

Xander gripped the phone. He knew all the right words to say to reassure her and put the train back on the tracks. He had done it a dozen times before. It would put the universe in its correct orbit. It
would appease not only Cordelia, but all of his other friends as well. Friends that saw him as a half of a them.

His brain formed the words into a coherent sentence but his tongue, the same tongue that had just found a home in Spike's mouth, wouldn't say them. "Look, Cordy. It's just that...."

"Oh, my, God!! You are. You are breaking up with me! WHY? What did I do? I'm sorry! Oh, God, please Xander, I'm sorry. Just tell me what I did and I won't do it again! What about all our plans? What about getting married after high school and buying a house? What about little Tommy and Peggy, our kids? No, Xander, I have given you the last three years of my life, you can't just dump me like yesterday's garbage! I'll die! I'll just die!"

By now the sobbing on the other end of the phone had reached a frightening, near-hysterical level and Xander was at a loss as to what to do. He felt backed into a corner and feared she may actually harm herself. "No, Cordy. No, we aren't breaking
up. I'm sorry. My mind has just been on other things. We're all right. Everything is OK. I promise I'll do better."

The screaming on the other end stopped and she sniffled and sucked in short gasps of air before hesitantly answering. His voice was not convincing but all she wanted were the words. As long as she still had him, she could figure the rest out later. "Yeah? Really?"

"Yeah. Really. Look, Cordy, I'm beat. I'm going to bed. We can talk about this tomorrow. Goodnight."

"Sure. Yeah you get some sleep and...."

But Xander had already hung up.
Part Twenty-Five

The next two weeks ran as smoothly as honey off a grizzly's chin. Spike and Xander would meet on the shore of the grand Pacific at daybreak, a time of day that found the beach generally deserted. Together they would face the rising sun, often pretending that they were the last two people left on the face of the earth.

Reverently, they would watch the globe of burning light appear in streaks of gold and red looking as though it were battling the night to bring light and warmth to another beautiful day. They would stand in the wet, packed sand as the froth and foam of the ocean roared in their ears and washed over their feet, and when the sky was light enough to be able to see clearly, they would grab Xander's board and plunge into the raging waters.

Sometimes they still rode tandem. Not because Spike's level of accomplishment deemed it necessary, but more because both boys craved the physical contact it allowed. They touched, caressed
and, when no one could see, they kissed passionately as the waves, like decent society, tried to wash them apart.

More often, however, Xander would wade out till the water reached his waist and watch as Spike paddled the board out and into the forceful current. Xander would squint and shield the sun from his eyes as he saw his boy grow smaller and smaller into the distance. Then, as Xander's heart pounded with excitement and fear, he would watch as Spike turned, waited, paddled and rose to sail across the surface of the ocean.

The student had very nearly mastered the lesson. No longer did the muscles in his arms scream at the end of the day. No longer did he roll over and tumble off each time he tried to turn around and, more importantly, Spike was beginning to get the feel of the ebb and flow of the waves. His instincts were starting to hone in and refine. He was starting to get the nudge of whether the next wave washing up under him was simply a lone hump or if it was a precursor to a driving, lifting monster behind it.
Spike Giles was becoming a California boy.

Around noon, they would call it a day. Relaxing and resting on their blanket on the beach, sometimes Spike would have brought a cooler of sandwiches and iced tea for their lunch. Other days, Xander would treat them to hot dogs and cold Cokes at the concession stand. He didn't mind spending a little of his money on Spike, especially since he was just two weeks away from winning all he needed.

In the afternoons, after a short nap in the sun, Riley would join them and the serious work would begin. The first few days Spike had stayed to watch but both boys quickly realized that that would not work. Xander needed to focus on the waves and the water, not the boy on the beach. After that, Spike began to spend his afternoons with the girls.

They shopped at the mall. They went to the matinee horror movies or they simply hung out at Buffy's where her mother would bake cookies and her sister Dawn would annoyingly interject herself
into their conversations. Spike was more than content.

And Xander had never been happier in his life.

In theory, he knew that homosexuality was wrong and truthfully he did not see himself as a fag, a queer, a homo. He was just Xander. And Spike was just...amazing! Xander couldn't get enough of the boy. When they were apart, he was all Xander thought of. When they were together, he couldn't take his eyes off of him. Upon first glimpse of Spike each morning, Xander's heart would jump and dance in his chest. A silly grin would creep across his lips and he would rush forward to meet him.

And he would find any excuse to touch. Their hands would brush, their bodies would bump as they walked, and in response to any silly joke Spike told, Xander would tackle and wrestle him to the sand, tickling and grabbing at him. To the outside would, it appeared to be teenaged male bonding. To Xander, it was becoming much, much more.
Then there was Cordelia. The fly in the ointment.

Xander's response to her was to ignore her. He did the minimum required to keep her satisfied. He sat with her at the Chatterbox while he and Spike played footsie under the table and he tried not to hang up on her when she called him and babbled on and on about God knows what because Xander sure didn't.

Spike's reaction to her was becoming somewhat less altruistic. It needled him when Cordelia looped her arm through Xander's possessively and it poked him uncomfortably when she ran her claw-like fingers through his thick, dark hair. He listened to Xander's excuses of not wanting to hurt her feelings and Spike knew that underlined in Xander's false front with Cordy was his terror of people 'knowing.'

But it was getting harder and harder to pretend that Xander was not his.

~*~*~*~*~
Spike stood on the doorstep. He pushed the doorbell and waited. His fingers fiddled with the small square of cardboard that was tucked in his pocket. When he was unpacking the last of his things, he had come across that Ringo trading card that he had been telling them about. It was one that was only released in England and he knew the girls would simply have a cow when they saw it.

"William. How many times have I told you that you don't have to ring the bell? Just knock a couple times and come on in."

Spike swiped his shoes on the welcome mat and stepped over the threshold, grinning at Buffy's mother. She was a wonderful lady. She wore that new perfume that Woolworth's sold, Heaven's Scent. Spike wished he could wear things like that.

"Thanks, Mrs. Summers. Is Buffy upstairs?"

Joyce Summers stood between Spike and the stairway. She nervously picked at her bracelets and
she licked her lips. "Um, yes they are. Say, William, how is that nice father of yours? I used to see him at the grocers now and then but he hasn't been around lately. He is such a gentleman."

Spike took a step to the side to edge around her but she again blocked him. "Oh, yeah, he's OK. He's been real busy getting settled in at the college. He starts his classes in a couple months and he wants to be ready. I'll tell him you said...."

"Yes, of course, I knew a man of his importance would be busy, but he isn't busy every day is he? That is to say, if I were to invite him over for dinner, well, both of you, he would find time, wouldn't he?"

Spike crossed his arms and blinked. So that was it. Apparently Sunnydale was woefully short of eligible men. Well, what the hell, if his intercession on her behalf was the price he had to pay to skirt past her, that was cool with him. "Sure, yeah, dinner would be keen."

Joyce's face immediately lit up and she slumped in
relief. Assuming that meant the guardrail was lowered, Spike darted around her and rushed for the stairway, only to be stopped one last time.

"Oh, William, just one other thing. Although I generally loathe gossip, I must ask. Word around town says that Jenny Calendar has staked a bit of a claim on your father. I certainly wouldn't want to...."

William flipped his hand in the air as he leapt up the stairs, hollering as he went. "Nah, she just lives next door. They aren't dating or anything. It's cool."

When he hit the top of the steps, he turned to the left and ran into the pink and fluffy room. He kicked off his shoes and he flopped dramatically onto the bed next to Willow and Buffy.

"Hey girls, what's up?"

Willow casually rolled over and tucked her hands under her head.
"Buffy has decided to let Angel pop her cherry and we were just discussing when. She thinks the 4th of July night would be perfect. You know, liberation and all that."

"WILLOW!"

Ignoring the horrified, shocked expression on Spike's face, Buffy sat bolt upright and faced her Benedict Arnold. "How could you? That was confidential information. No offense, Spike, but that was not a subject for group discussion."

Spike was stunned and easily overlooked the perceived exclusion, jumping in to offer his opinion.

"Are you? Are you really? Oh Lord, Buffy, that is big. Really big. Do you love him? You should never give yourself to someone if you don't love him. I don't think you love him. Will he still respect you if you do it? Is he pressuring you? Why else would you do it?"

Buffy gave another glare of an evil eye to Willow before turning to Spike with a defiant tone to her
voice and an unsure look in her eyes. "Because I don't intend to be the last living virgin in Sunnydale High. Besides, it isn't that big a deal. Cordy and Xan are doing it all the time. I just want to know what I'm missing."

Spike sat back on his heels. He felt as though the wind had been punched right out of him. Was it true? Was Xander, his Xander, really screwing Cordelia behind his back? He wanted to demand the truth. He wanted to ask for times and dates and proof. He didn't have the chance. When it seemed as though things couldn't get any worse, the very bitch herself bounced happily into the room.

"Hi, y'all, guess what? I got the latest issue of Bride magazine and the dresses are to die for! I can see me wearing.... Gee. What's the what? You all look like someone just slapped your mommas."

**Part Twenty-Six**

Spike flew off the bed and darted across the room. He stuck his head into the hallway and scanned up and down to check for the intrusion of any parental
interference. He felt sick to his stomach and knew if he pursued this subject he would be opening up a whole can of worms and possibly a broken heart, but there was no way he could not ask.

When he was certain that Buffy's mother was nowhere around, he gently closed the door and turned around to face three pairs of questioning eyes. The prized bubblegum card in his pocket had gone down several notches in importance in the face of this startling revelation. He blinked with big cow eyes and chewed his thumbnail. "Is it true? Do you and Xan go all the way?"

Cordelia's mouth fell open. Immediately, she spun around towards the guilty expressions of her best friends.

"Wow, way to keep your lips zipped. Thanks a lot! And to tell a guy! Gees Louise! If I had known we were taking a trip to Finksville today I would have worn my pink bullshit boots. Is there anything else you want to tell him about me? Like maybe what color my underwear is, or the fact
that I was twelve when I got the curse? Damn, personal business here, ladies!"

Buffy suddenly found a spot on her ceiling that was the most fascinating anomaly that she had ever observed and she studied it to great length, leaving Willow to make the explanations and worm their way out.

"Well, gosh, Cordy, it just kinda slipped out. But, hey, Spike is one of us now and he won't tell anyone. Pinky swear! Besides, it really is obvious. I mean Xan has been crazy happy lately. Everywhere he goes he has that cat-ate-the-canary look on his face. Like he has a secret so big and so wonderful that he'll just explode. So, now Spike knows what Xan's secret is. No big deal, is it Spike?"

It took everything Spike had in him not to cry. Numbly, he nodded as the girls hooked pinkies with him in an oath of silence and promise. Cordelia giggled happily.

"He has been happier hasn't he? It's because we
had a real heart-to-heart a couple weeks ago on the phone. We talk every night on the phone. Well, you know I'm not one of these girls that wants a guy by trapping him, so I asked him straight out if he was sure he still wanted to get married after we graduate and he said yes! He said he was sure! So, since we're almost engaged, there's nothing wrong with it. Besides, Xander is the hottest thing in Sunnydale. Do you know how many skanks would love to get their hooks into him? A girl's gotta protect her own property."

Spike wondered if he would be on that list of Xander-hungry skanks and realized that he probably held the top spot. "So, he told you that he loves you?"

Cordelia didn't directly answer but gave the inference that Xander had all but gotten down on one knee. She sighed deeply and clutched her magazine to her chest.

"Xander is a true romantic. Oh, God, it's going to be so wonderful! Oh, shit, I almost forgot, that's why I
brought my new mag. Check out the dress on page 23. Isn't it just dreamy? I could do my hair like Natalie Wood. Look how the veil tucks under the curls."

Spike stood forgotten and devastated as the girls squealed and ogled the pictures in the Bride magazine. He felt like he might die. It had all been a lie. Xander had been playing with him during the day and then rolling in the hay with Cordelia at night. They were having sex. Xander, his Xander, no, Cordelia's Xander. He had been a fool.

Finally, he forced his legs to move and his throat to unlock as he backed toward the closed bedroom door. "I gotta go. My Da is expecting me home. I can't.... Bye."

Spike spun on his heel and ran from the room. Buffy watched him go with confused curiosity. Willow's eyebrows rose in suspicion while Cordelia continued to stare at the vision in white, imagining that was her dressed in the satin gown with the long train and the handsome man at her
side.

"What the hell was that all about?"

Cordy shrugged and asked, "Do you think I would look better in a full skirt or an A-line?"

~*~*~*~*~

Spike whimpered. His eyes burned with unshed tears and he feared that he might vomit as his feet rapidly descended the stairway. His legs felt like lead as he dragged them around the landing and he hurried toward the front door. He never heard or responded when Joyce called after him reminding him to have Rupert call her.

When he got home, he was overwhelmingly relieved that his father was still out. He took full advantage of the privacy to rush to his room, throw himself down on his bed and cry his heart out.
Xander and Riley fell onto the sand. They were exhausted and waterlogged. The waves had been pitifully small that day and they both knew that continuing was pointless.

"I'm through. How about you?"

Riley brushed sand from his taut legs and he sat up. "Yeah, we might as well pack it in. I was hoping to spend some time with Buffy anyway. Be honest, Xan. You know Buff better than I do. Do you think I really have a chance with her? Sometimes we seem like we're chugging ahead full steam, then other days she won't give me the sweat off her ass. I'm really crazy about her but I won't keep beating my head against a brick wall."

Xander shook his head. Girls were a total mystery to him. All drama and trauma. All gossip and giggle. They were aliens from a planet that Xander had no
interest in visiting, but that wasn't the point. His bud was hurting and he needed Xander to lie.

"It's all hormones, Ri. Their mood hinges on that time of the month. Remember that cartoon we had to watch in health class? 'Puberty's Promise'? Well, it's like that little Mother Nature said, girls can be a bitch when they're riding the curse. I know Buffy isn't seeing anyone else so hang in there. She'll come around."

"Yeah, I guess I'm a little bit jealous. I want for Buffy and I to have what you and Cordy have."

Xander checked the time on his watch and wondered what Spike was doing. He itched to be with him.

"Shit. Don't hold us up as the perfect couple. We got problems too. Truth is, Cordy's dreams are not necessarily my dreams. I don't know what I want to do after we graduate but I don't think getting married is it."
Riley was surprised, but attributed Xander's indecisiveness to his college opportunities.

"You ever send in those college admission forms?"

Xander stood up. The sun was sinking low in the sky as the day shifted from hot afternoon to the promise of a cooler evening. "Nah. There's plenty of time for that. The deadline isn't until January and I just can't think of anything school related when we're wallowing in the last great summer of our lives. Besides, we have a surfing competition coming up. Nothing is more important than that. Not Cordy, not Buffy, and certainly not college."

Riley jumped up. He had caught his second wind and all this talk about Buffy had him twitchy and hopeful. If he could catch her in a receptive mood, he just might get a feel of those small, round, pointy nipples that poked out in the front of her mohair sweater.

"True fact, Xan, but Mother Nature can play a few tricks with my hormones too and right now I do
believe I need to take a shower and then see what Buffy is up to. You got a date tonight?"

Xander collected his things and prepared to leave the beach. "I sure hope so."

~*~*~*~*~

Xander rushed home. He showered and changed into clean shorts and shirt. He sat through a long, torturous dinner in which his parents insisted on an interrogation that would have made Khrushchev proud. He dodged his mother's questions about his future and he ducked his dad's hints that premarital sex was unheard of in the Harris family and both parents prayed that Xander would do nothing to sully the good Harris name.

Xander gave all the right answers. He nodded when the time was right and he scowled and shook his head at the suggestion that he might do something irregular or suspicious. He shoveled his food in without the effort of chewing, and his mind was
already on the short blond boy that Xander knew would be waiting on him.

Finally, he gulped the last of his glass of milk and he wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "Great dinner, Mom. You know meatloaf is always a favorite. Well, I'm off like a prom dress. I won't be late."

Xander jumped up and headed for the door as his mother called after him.

"You're going out? Again? Gee, Xander, I was hoping you would stay in tonight and watch Jackie Gleason with your father and I. The June Taylor Dancers are going to be on tonight. You always like them. Do you have to go? We never see you anymore."

"Aw, Jess, leave the boy alone. You remember what it's like to be that age and have a special girl waiting for you. Remember when you used to wait for me to come over and pick you up? We would go out to the old strip mine pond and skinny....."
"Tony Harris!!! I never did any such thing!"

Xander and his father both laughed at Jessica's horrified outrage. Tony then winked at his boy. The accusation may have been a fib but it accomplished the intended purpose. It was enough of a distraction that it gave Xander time to make his escape. Xander gave his father a nod of gratitude, his mother a kiss on the cheek, and he darted out the door before he was forced to witness his parents tickle and wrestle like school kids as Tony made up with his girl.

By now the sun was low in the sky. He jumped in his mother's Ford and couldn't wait until the car he was driving was his own. He cruised down the now-familiar path to the nice house with the large front porch and the wonderful blue-eyed resident.

Parking at the curb, he noticed that the front porch light was on, as always. It felt warm and welcoming, like he was expected. Xander leapt from the car and lurched up the steps two at a time. This was the
same thing he had done every night for the past two weeks and it was still the high point of his day. He rang the bell and with a huge grin on his face, he waited.

Part Twenty-Seven

He rang again and craned his neck to peer in the glass panels at the sides of the front door. Maybe Spike and his father went out. Maybe no one was home and he wouldn't be able to see Spike tonight. Just as he was beginning to worry, he saw a shadowed movement in the entrance area and Xander rocked up on the balls of his feet in delight and excitement.

"What do you want, Xander?"

The muffled voice that spoke through the closed door carried no warmth or welcoming and it stirred
concern in Xander. "Spike? Hey, it's me. Come on out. We can go for a ride. I got the car."

"Go away, Xander. I'm not going anywhere with you. Leave me alone."

Xander was stunned. He wanted to think it was a cruel joke and that at any minute now, Spike would throw open the door and rush out, but Xander could hear the tone in Spike's voice that left no doubt that this was not a game. Xander placed his palms on the closed door. He swallowed hard and tried to keep his voice calm and quiet. "What's wrong, Spike? Did I do something? Are you mad about something? Please, come out and talk to me. We don't have to go anywhere. We can just sit on the porch swing. Please, Spike, tell me what's happened."

For a long pause, there was no answer as Spike fought back the tears and the urge to rush into Xander's arms. But he knew it would be a false embrace. He knew Xander's arms were wrapped around Cordelia when he made love to her and it
was a knife in Spike's heart. After a few moments, when he felt he could speak, Spike clenched his fists and pressed his forehead against the cold, hard wood. "I don't want to see you anymore, Xander. Our lessons are over. Our friendship is over. We are...over. Go away. Go back to your friends and your girlfriend. Just...go."

Xander gulped in a couple of lungfuls of night air as his resistant brain processed what it was being told, and when the confusion morphed into reality, Xander snapped. He began slapping the palms of his hands against the door and shouting, "SPIKE! SPIKE! Open the door! Come out here and talk to...."

The porch light snapped off and Xander was plunged into darkness.

Rupert watched the scene from his chair in the living room. He couldn't hear the words but he could read the emotion in the body movements of his young son. For nearly three weeks he had seen the bigger boy hanging around his house and his son, and Rupert had tried not to be concerned
despite the warning signs.

William's friendship with Xander was suspicious. There were too many touches. The smiles seemed to be knowing, and the body language whispered of an intimacy that crossed the line of buddies and chums. And now this.

Like a silent film of the '20s, Rupert did not need sound to interpret the dialog that had just played out. Xander had figured out what was happening and the fact that William's intentions toward him were less than honorable. Xander had flagged and pegged the smaller lad as a sissy-boy. A queer. He had come here to confront and reject him. It was what Rupert worried about the most.

He loved his son more than life itself and the fact that he was different did not bring him shame, only concern. It promised that his future would be both difficult and lonely. It meant if he wanted to have children and a fulfilled life, he would have to lie. It was a situation fraught with misery no matter which path he chose.
"Everything all right, William?"

Spike sniffed and swiped his forearm under his runny nose. He turned around to face his father but kept his red eyes averted.

"Yes, Da. Everything is fine. I'm just tired and wanted to stay in. I'm going on up to bed. Night, Da."

"Goodnight, Will...."

Rupert knew his boy didn't hear him. The lad was already up the stairs and the door firmly closed. Rupert laid aside his paper and he removed his glasses, polishing them as he thought about what to do.

Xander was shell-shocked. He stood rooted to the weathered wooden planks on the dark front porch trying to figure out what the hell had just happened. His mind replayed the entire morning with Spike, and he couldn't pinpoint any one spot
where there had been tension or misunderstanding. They had, like all mornings, parted on good terms with the unspoken plan that they would get together later and spend time.

The budding masculinity, fueled by testosterone, that coursed through his body screamed at him. It claimed an ownership and possessiveness for Spike that had him considering charging through the front door to snatch the boy by his arms, shaking the truth from him. Societal considerations prevented such unforgivable and unacceptable behavior.

His arms hung limply at this sides as he continued to stare through the darkness at the closed door. He blinked in confused frustration and he finally took a step backward. He didn't want to leave but he didn't know what else to do. He wondered if he should try again. He frantically tried to think of something to say or do that would force Spike to open up and talk to him. Xander was sure he could straighten this out if they could talk. Tomorrow.

Deciding that whatever had ticked Spike off would
seem silly tomorrow, Xander slowly trod back down the steps and moved toward his mother's car. He was certain that in the morning light, Spike would see how crazy he was being and Xander could talk to him on the beach before their morning lesson. After all, no one could stay mad when they stood in the magnificence of the blinding sun as it reflected off the Pacific Ocean.

Spike crouched on the floor. He knelt by his bed with all the lights out. He tugged back the corner of his curtain and peered out into the night illuminated by the half moon overhead. The tears blurred his vision and he knew that in a few minutes they would course freely down his face, followed by a river of more.

And he watched. From this angle, he could see the tall, strong boy standing on the porch. He could see the slump of his shoulders and the tilt of his dark head and it killed Spike to know that he had made Xander unhappy. But then another thought crept in. A mental image of Xander seeking comfort and condolence in another's arms. Xander would go to
Cordelia.

The certainty punched him like a fist to the stomach and a wrenching grip around his heart. Spike let out a whimper. He released the curtain and he curled into a ball of sobbing devastation and humiliation as his soft blue eyes turned red.

~*~*~*~*~

It was breathtaking.

Even for a boy who had grown up here seeing the sun rise and set over the horizon, this morning's daybreak was one that stood out above the rest. The sky was an explosion of gold and red streaks split by the rays of sun that cut through and reached down towards the earth like God's slim fingers pointing to his chosen spot.

It invoked feelings of peace and power and well-being. Or at least it should have but now, as Xander stood all alone staring off into the horizon, there
was no happiness within him. Spike was not here and he was not coming. It was truth. It was harsh reality. The glory of the morning was false.

~*~*~*~*~

"Are you sleeping in? You are usually up and out by now."

Spike rolled over in his bed. His head hurt and his eyes were puffy from last night's crying jag. He was wearing his favorite Flintstone jammy bottoms but even that had not brought him comfort. He flopped his blanket down to his waist and Rupert noticed that his son's bare chest was sporting a few new fine, pale hairs and he almost smiled.

"I don't feel well this morning. I think I will stay in bed for a while."

Rupert took a step forward. His son's delicate features looked so much like his mother's that it tugged at Rupert's heart. He wanted to take the boy
in his arms and ask him what was wrong. He wanted to hear his boy's troubles and woes but that went against Rupert's stiff-upper-lip upbringing and he couldn't quite bend that far. "Yes, well, I am off to the university. I had made arrangements to meet Miss Calendar for lunch but if you are ill, I will come back home and...."

Spike raised up in bed and propped his head on his hand. "No, no, don't do that. I'll be fine. I might go out later. You go ahead and enjoy your lunch."

Rupert nodded and fished a five out of his pocket. "Well, if you are sure. Here is some money. You can go down to the diner and meet some of your new friends for lunch."

Spike smiled but doubted that he would be doing that again. Now that he and Xander were on the outs, he was sure his ties with the others would be broken as well. With nothing more to say, Rupert turned to leave. At the last minute, Spike called to him.
"Da?"

"Yes, son?"

"Da, are you and Miss Calendar courting?"

Rupert stuttered and sputtered. He sought his brain for an explanation to the dinners, the movies and the shared evenings. Finally, it all came clear and with a sigh of resignation, he shook his head in disbelief.

"Good Lord. I do believe we are."

Part Twenty-Eight

By ten AM, Spike knew he couldn't stay in bed any longer. He was bored and restless and he missed the warm morning sun. Over the span of the last three weeks he had developed a pattern of rising
early and welcoming the dawn alongside his...what? What did he think Xander was?

He flung his legs over the side of the bed and he sat up as he pondered the question. Did he think they were boyfriends? If he did, it certainly wasn't simply wishful thinking. Xander had given every indication that he was a willing participant. He hugged and kissed and Spike had happily let Xander feel him up whenever the situation allowed.

And erections don't lie. Xander had sported wood like the great redwood forest. Although he made no move to touch or encourage Spike's hand into his pants, Xander had gone home nearly every night with a stiffy that could not be denied.

Was it all experimental fluff? Spike had run into that type before. Boys that just wanted to know what another guy feels like but would die before anyone else found out. They were boys that Spike thought of as snakes. Creatures that slither out from under a rock when no one is looking. They are dangerous. You never know when they will turn on you and
Was that Xander? Was he a snake that just wanted some perverted fun before he slithered back to Cordelia? Did he and Cordy laugh about it all when they were alone and under the covers naked?

"AAHH!"

It was a vivid mental image that drove Spike out of bed. He knew if he hung around here much longer, he would go insane. He leapt up, dressed, grabbed the lunch money his father had left on the dresser and he dragged his bike from the garage. He hopped up on the seat but before he could push off, he stopped.

Where would he go? Not to the beach, that was for sure, and not to the Chatterbox. It was almost a sure bet that several of the gang would be there, and while he had no idea what they really thought of him, he did not want to find out just yet.

The only thing left to do was to ride by the park.
Maybe an hour or two on a bench would clear his mind and give him some options. If nothing else, it would show him as the pitiful creature he really was and provide some serious brooding time. With his luck, a rabid squirrel would probably come along and bite him on the ankles.

With a resigned sigh, Spike aimed his Schwinn away from the direction of the ocean and he coasted toward the park. When he arrived, he was surprised at how the green trees, the chirping birds and the cool shade consoled him. He hopped off and walked his bike down one of the paved paths toward the area of seats.

"Good morning."

Spike stopped and his head snapped around. When he saw who had spoken, he grinned and quickly hurried over. He propped his bike against the tree and he dropped down to sit on the soft carpet of grass. "Tara. Hi. I didn't see you."

Tara finished the last twist that bound together the
ring of dandelions into a perfect circle. She held it out for inspection then, with a gentle smile, reached over and placed it on Spike's head. His ringlets of blond hair surrounded the stems as the yellow and white flowers rested like a crown. Tara chuckled, but Spike heard no mocking in her tone and he had to laugh too.

Her own long, light brown hair was sprinkled with daises and baby's breath and hung loosely around her face. She was dressed in a long, multicolored skirt and a white peasant blouse with cheap sandals on her feet. "What are you doing here alone? Aren't you usually with Xander or the others down at the beach this time of day?"

The smile fell from Spike's lips and was replaced by a plump-lipped pout. He shrugged and concentrated his attention on a small ant that was struggling to drag a bread crumb across a fallen leaf. "Don't have to spend all my time with him, do I? I have other things I might rather do. Got up this morning and decided I wanted to go for a bike ride, I did. So here I am. Riding my bike."
Tara cocked her head to the side and seemed to study the boy who still would not meet her gaze. When she was satisfied, she reached over and placed her hand on top of his. The unexpectedness of the contact caused Spike to look up.

"People don't always do or say what we want them to, Spike, but misunderstandings always come right if we help them along. If you and Xander had an argument, just talk it out. I don't know what happened, but I have known Xander since we were both six years old and he is a good person. I have known you for about a month and I already know that you are a good person too. Good people should not let bad feelings come between them."

Spike scooted closer and he intertwined his fingers with Tara's as he looked imploringly into her eyes. He felt like, out of everyone in Sunnydale, Tara would be the one to understand. She had a way about her that just exuded waves of empathy and kindness. "It wasn't an argument. Not exactly. It's hard to explain. Xander is wonderful! I like him very
much and I thought that he liked me too. But I guess I was wrong. He likes me but not LIKES likes me. Do you know what I mean?"

Tara squeezed the small hand in hers and her eyes twinkled. "I think I know exactly what you are saying. Is the fly in the ointment named Cordelia?"

Spike scowled and pulled his hand back. The very mention of the vile bitch's name sent his blood to boiling. Tara's expression never changed as she continued.

"Xander and Cordelia have been together for years yet their relationship is no further along than it was from their first date. I can't say why that is and maybe they can't either, but I do know that if they were meant to be, the evidence would be on their faces when they look at each other, and it isn't."

Spike crossed his arms around himself and he scowled. "They're doing it. They are going all the way. A lot. Probably every night."
Tara seemed to give this great thought before she answered. "I don't think that is true but if it is, it may only be sex. Have you ever heard of free love? It is an idea. A concept. A belief that sex is a physical pleasure that doesn't necessarily have to piggy-back on romance, marriage or monogamous commitment."

Spike blinked owlishly. It was shocking to hear someone voice such a scandalous position, but to hear these words come from someone as sweet and innocent as Tara made him want to slap his hands over his ears and hum "God Save The Queen" to block it out. And the worst part? It was titillating as hell.

"Tara!!"

Tara laughed in a voice that sounded like fairy bells ringing and Spike could not be mad. At the same time, he became aware of the deep, hollow rumbling in his belly and knew it was time to search out food. He scooted around to perch on his knees and he gently removed his floral headband, careful
not to damage it. He placed it on the ground and he climbed to his feet. "I gotta go. Thank you for being so nice to me Tara. Um, if I was to go looking for a sandwich shop or take-away, somewhere not the Chatterbox, where would I go?"

Tara picked up the crown of pretty weeds and placed it on her own head. "About a mile down the street is a place called The Snack Shack. They have wonderful vegetarian meals. I think they also serve dead animals if you like that sort of thing."

Spike looked in the direction she was pointing and he frowned. "Isn't that where the Franklyn kids go? The gang says we never go down there cause the Franklyn kids are like aliens or Martians or sumtin. Buffy said...."

"It's wrong to judge other people Spike. We should all love one another. I go there all the time and they aren't any different than we are. All that silliness is due to sports rivalry. Football games, basketball, all that pointless competition stuff. It has nothing to do with real life. They are nice if you are nice to them."
Give it a try, Spike. You might meet new people that get your mind off the old ones for a while."

Spike's face lit up. That sounded like an excellent idea. Just what he needed. He jumped on his bike, bid Tara good-bye, and he peddled off.

Part Twenty-Nine

Spike stood outside for a long time and studied the hub of Franklyn High's activity, otherwise known as the Snack Shack. It was a silver-colored diner shaped like a railroad caboose and it had several neon signs flashing in the windows. One shouted that the place was 'OPEN' and the others promised various soft drinks and snacks.

The entire side of the building had been painted with a caricature of a huge ten-foot-long hot dog with the caption "Actual Size!" lettered beneath.
Smaller print at the corner of the giant wiener contained a disclaimer of "Almost." Spike had to chuckle.

It was then that he had an epiphany. He realized that if he had stumbled upon this place before the Chatterbox, he would have aligned himself with the Franklyn kids instead of the Sunnydale lot. It was that simple. He would have been a Rubble instead of a Flintstone. No better, no worse, just different. A simple twist of fate and happenstance. With this new mindset, Spike squared his shoulders, he parked his bike and he strolled inside.

What he found confirmed that Tara was right. No one had horns or tails. There were no flying saucers in the outside parking lot and no one seemed to be carrying switchblades. They were just kids, and from the looks of the place, a lot of kids.

Like the Chatterbox, the focus of activity was centered around the jukebox and several couples were bopping to the strains of "Wooly Bully." There were girls with shorts and ponytails and there were
tough guys playfully shoving each other and swatting the girls on the rumps. There were attractive people and there were a fair share of homely, overweight and pimply kids. In short, it felt great.

Spike wormed his way through the pack and found a small booth that had just been vacated. He sat down and grinned as the waitress flew by him, tossing a menu and a promise of a quick return. Spike wiggled happily in his seat and tried to ignore the little voice in the back of his mind that whispered, *Xander would love this place.*

"Well, slap my ass and call me Sally. Look who's here."

Spike looked up and rolled his eyes as the familiar boy slid into the booth beside him. "Penn. Or should I call you Penny? Cause like a bad one, you keep turning up."

Penn threw his head back and barked out a laugh. He then threw his arm over the back of the booth
and effectively around Spike's shoulders as he scooted a bit closer. He was wearing a red plaid button-down and a pair of stiff, new denims. His hair was cut and combed like a ten year old's and his face was bright with humor. "You can call me whatever you want. I love your accent. You talk better than Mr. Ed. So, did you come looking for me? You finally ditch them losers and come here for a real man?"

Spike laid down his menu and turned to fully face the boy, who was now pressed tightly up against him. "What the fuck do you want, Penn. I always get the impression you are making fun of me or trying to insinuate something ugly. If you have something to say, just say it."

Suddenly all the sarcasm, bravado and false airs slipped off Penn like silk panties off a whore. His whole persona changed and he leaned his face close, keeping his voice low. "All I want to say is that I think you're real keen. You're neato. All the way to the top of your blond head down to the toes that I know are as cute as can be. I'm not playing games."
Oh, sure, I talk shit cause I don't like getting beaten up by the jocks but I ain't playin' with you. I just wanna dip you in honey and then lick you clean. I'm crazy as fuck about you. Have been since the first time I saw you."

Penn's breathless tone and sincere words left no doubt that he wasn't joking. The heat and intensity in his gaze shot through Spike's body, causing a warm tingle that sent two separate thoughts spiraling through his brain. On one side was the good Spike that reminded him of his feelings for Xander, and on the other was Bad Spike who snickered, snorted and rubbed his hands together evilly, remembering Tara's comments about free love.

Spike was not ready to pick a side of the fence yet but he also didn't toss Penn out, telling himself that there was no call to be rude. After all, he was the interloper in Penn's world. Good manners called for politeness. "Oh, well, yes, I see. Would you, um like to have a burger with me?"
"Whoop! Why yes, my little English crumpet, I believe I would."

Penn had answered in his best attempt at an English accent that sounded more German than anything from the British Isles, but Spike's lips twitched up at the effort. Penn then waved his hand wildly in the air snapping his fingers. Apparently it was the acceptable summons because, within minutes, a thin, older woman limped over with a pad and pen. Spike recognized the walk and knew that Paula was a polio victim. A common affliction back home.

"What'cha want?"

"Hey, Paula. Me and my friend will have...."

"Bring us all cheeseburger platters and three bottles of Dr. Pepper."

The dark-haired interloper slipped into the booth across from Penn and Spike and settled in, obviously intending to stay. Spike waited to see what Penn would do. He didn't have long to wait.
Penn immediately picked up a handful of salt packs and tossed them at the newcomer. "Where the hell you been, Faith? You were supposed to meet me here an hour ago."

Faith stuck her tongue out at her friend and brushed the paper packets off. Spike tried not to notice the two or three that had slipped down the front of her low-cut top and disappeared in the deepest crevasse of cleavage that he had ever seen on someone who was not Dolly Parton.

"Fuck you Penndelton. Sides, it don't look like you have actually been all alone while you waited. Who's the new guy?"

Penn beamed proudly and leaned toward Spike possessively. "This here is Spike, the guy I told you about. See, and you said he would never jump ship and swim over to the Franklyn shore. Ain't he cool? Ain't he everything I said he was?"

Faith sat back in her seat and crossed her arms. Her dark eyes stared and scrutinized Spike like an ant.
under a microscope as Spike squirmed nervously. When the seconds threatened to stretch into minutes, Spike began to consider making his escape but then, when the intensity reached the red zone, the tension eased. Faith blinked. Her face relaxed and her attention was diverted.

Squeezing her hand into her too-tight jeans, Faith pulled out a flattened pack of Newports and she shook one out. She tapped the end on the table, stuck it between her full, pink lips and struck a match. When she blew a long stream of smoke out, she relaxed. "Yeah, he's the tits all right. So my question is, if he's such hot stuff, what the fuck is he doing with a loser like you?"

Despite his false face of disgust, Penn was thrilled that his best friend had given her stamp of approval to his potential boyfriend. He slid down in his seat and swung his foot, connecting his left Ked with her right shin. "Oh, ha ha. It is to laugh. You are just the funniest bitch on the planet, Faith. You just slay me."
Faith and Spike both snickered as Faith kicked back, barely missing Spike's leg. "Yeah that's me. A slayer. The one girl in the world appointed to slay all dark-haired, skinny homo boys with my amazing sense of humor. Be prepared to laugh so hard that you will wake up one morning and want to screw girls."

"NOOOOOO!"

Penn's face had a horrified expression at the very thought, and he flailed his arms wildly above his head. All three friends rolled in their seats with laughter till the tears ran down their faces. By the time they had caught their breath, the waitress had brought their food and they all dove in.

Sitting in the back corner of the diner watching the odd scene was a quiet customer conducting business. He alternated his time and attention between the product he was selling and his curiosity at the strange activities that were playing out in the booth.

Oz was more than a stoner. He was a profiteer and
a middleman in a flourishing business. He bought a quantity of product off of Angel and resold it to cover the cost of his own enjoyment. Mostly he sold to the Franklyn side of town simply because Sunnydale was too close to home. Over the course of the past year, Oz had amassed a large clientele and conducted most of his business at the Snack Shack. Of course there were teens, but they had little money. The bulk of his sales were from businessmen and housewives who would pop in, buy a sandwich for cover and a pack of weed for later.

It was a profitable situation for Oz and equally for the Shack which encouraged them to turn a blind eye. Especially considering that Officer Pitsenburger, the neighborhood beat cop, was one of Oz's regulars.

But for today, he was done. He had a pocketful of cash and one last baggie that he was saving for himself. There was no reason to stay except for the platter of fries to satisfy his munchies and the odd scene across the room. Over the past weeks, Spike
and Xander had been joined at the hip. Like Siamese-fucking-twins. Now, here was Spike in enemy territory and totally Xanless. Interesting.

Oz popped another fry into his mouth as Butch, the Franklyn quarterback punched him lightly on the arm. "Hey, Oz, dude, you holdin'?"

Oz never took his eyes off the threesome who were joking, jostling and finishing their lunch. "No, man. Sold clean out till tomorrow. Catch me then."

Part Thirty

"Why the hell are we doing this?"

Buffy stopped walking. She tugged off her flip flop and shook the sand out of it before slipping it back on her foot and resuming her trek. "I told you. We haven't seen Oz around for two days and I'm
worried about him. I just think we should go out to Angel's shack and make sure that he isn't there."

Willow hurried to keep up. She knew that was bullshit. Buffy didn't worry about anyone but Buffy. Besides, she was more concerned that they hadn't seen Spike in nearly a week and that Xander refused to say why or even mention Spike's name.

Keeping her feet on the rickety wooden pathway, Willow called ahead to the swishing blond ponytail. "You aren't just coming out here to see Angel, are you? Oh, God, Buffy please tell me that you aren't still planning on letting Angel into your treasure chest."

Rounding the bend and through the tall reeds, they arrived at the small ramshackle building. Buffy turned to her friend and batted her eyes innocently. "I'm only here because I'm a loyal friend, Wil. We're going to pop in, see if Oz is here and then hurry back to the beach. Xan and Riley will be practicing for another hour and they'll never miss us."
Before Willow could give a yes or no, Buffy knocked twice then pushed open the door and stepped tentatively in. Located in the marsh and surrounded by trees, the cabin was always dark inside and required a few moments for the eyes to adjust. When they did, Buffy looked all around. One area of the room had a broken-down couch and an overturned barrel which served as a table.

The far wall was a kitchen of sorts. A sink with several plastic water jugs and a small ice chest. The lack of electricity and running water did not seem to hamper him.

Just when they were beginning to think there was no one there, Angel came dragging out of the back bedroom. He yawned and scratched his head seemingly undisturbed or surprised to find visitors standing in his home. He wore plain white, county jail issued boxer shorts that gaped open in the front pouch by a pronouncement of morning wood, which caused both girls to blush hotly although neither looked away.
"Well, well. Look what we have here. You girls buying or selling?"

Willow was struck dumb by the implication but Buffy was not about to be dismissed. Taking a small step forward, she put on a fake brave face and took a deep breath, hoping that the extra air in her lungs would also serve to plump up her nearly flat chest. "We were looking for Oz. Is he here?"

Angel smirked. He reached into his ice chest and pulled out a can of beer for his breakfast. After rooting around the cluttered counter, he found the church key, punched little triangle holes in both sides of the top of the can and took a big gulp. "You see him around here? Maybe I got him hid in the bedroom. Which one of you girls want to come into my bedroom and look for him?"

Willow gasped and took a step back. When she saw the look of determination on Buffy's face, she grabbed her friend by the arm and tugged, whispering harshly, "No, Buff, don't you even think
Buffy shook off the grip and took a small step forward. Her voice was shaky and uncertain as she admonished the short redhead. "He might be in there. We came to see, didn't we? We can't leave unless we know."

Angel held up his beer in the direction of his inner sanctum as if giving the go-ahead. His face said he had nothing to hide. Willow was not convinced. Buffy licked her lips nervously and crept toward the doorway. When she reached the opening, she cautiously eased in and looked around.

The room was no bigger than a closet. The bed was simply a stained mattress on the floor with a pillow and a blanket tossed on top. There was a small bookcase that held a change of clothes, and a pair of sandals were at the foot of the bed. The entire room had a musky smell that Buffy could not place.

"See anything you like?"
Buffy squeaked and jumped at the voice that spoke so intimately in her ear that the words puffed warmly against her cheek. She spun around to find him leaning down. His face was nearly touching hers. His lips so full and pink that she couldn't take her eyes from them. Closer and closer he leaned. Buffy closed her eyes and tilted her face upward and waited for the magic moment to arrive.

Nothing happened.

Confused, she squinted one eye open and he burst into laughter.

Buffy was furious with humiliation as she shoved him away and stormed past him. "You are a fucking asshole!"

Angel threw his hands up innocently and continued to chuckle as she marched for the door. "What? Hey, I don't do a chick with an audience. Tell you what, you come back next week when everybody is down on the beach for the Fourth of July bonfire and I'll do you up right. We can have our own
celebration. What do you say?"

Buffy did not answer, but the pause in her step told him all he needed to know. She would be back and that was one more ripe, sweet cherry he would be stamping on his headboard. If he had a headboard. Angel reached in and grabbed another beer before flopping down on the couch with a smug grin.

When they got back to the beach, they were in time to see Xander and Riley emerging from the water. They watched as the guys rinsed off their boards and stood on the shore catching their breath. Willow had to ask.

"Would you really have let him kiss you?"

"No! Yes. I don't know."

"Did you see his thingy?"

Both girls grabbed each other's hands and they squealed as they jumped up and down. Neither had ever actually seen a penis before and the small
flashes of skin that peeked from the boxers were a stunning revelation. One they would talk about for years.

Riley rolled his board over in the ocean's wake, making sure all the foam and seaweed was rinsed from it. When he heard the familiar screams, he glanced up on the beach. "What do you suppose has them all in a twitter?"

Xander shrugged and stood his own board up on end while he waited for Riley to finish. "Who knows. Probably some new singer on American Bandstand. You remember how they acted the last time Bobby Darin was on."

Riley nodded and hoisted his board out of the water, but he was not yet ready to join the others. For the past week he had seen a big change in his friend and surfing partner, and it had him concerned. He really needed his half of the prize money and he could tell that Xander's mind was not focused on the competition.
"So what's going on with you lately, and don't tell me nothing 'cause I can tell that your brain has bugged out. You ain't with it, Xan. We're nearly one week from the big contest and you act like you don't care. If we lose because your mind is trippin', I deserve to know why."

Xander dropped his board down and he sat next to it, letting the waves wash up over his lap. Riley was right. He deserved an explanation and the truth was, Xander had been desperate to talk to someone about it. He just prayed that after he was done, Riley would still be speaking to him.

"Fuck, man, I'm sorry. You're right. I think I'm going crazy or something. See, Spike and I had a big fight and I don't even know what about. He won't talk to me. He won't see me. I drive by his house like ten times a day trying to catch a glimpse of him but he's never there. I call but his father always answers the phone and tells me Spike won't talk to me. Christ, Ri, I feel like I'm fucking dying."

Riley sank down to sit facing his best friend. The
heart-wrenching tone in Xander's voice and the pleading in his eyes rocked Riley's foundation of belief. He had to be misunderstanding. It couldn't be what it seemed, yet he could see that it was. Xander was in love and not with Cordelia.

"Jesus-fucking-Christ, Xan. Spike is a dude. You can't get all hung up on...."

Xander jumped to his feet and grabbed his board. He should never have tried to talk about this. Now Riley would probably tell the others and it would be all over Sunnydale that Xander Harris is a homo. He would be ruined, and the worst part was that he still wouldn't have Spike. Before he could go, Riley gently placed a hand on Xander's upper arm.

"Wait. Xan, I'm sorry. I didn't know. Hey, we're still bros. Tell you what, I think we need to find Spike and get to the bottom of this. Not that I want to know about your bottoms! Hell no! Strictly a chick-lover here."

Xander was flooded with relief. He snorted and
chuckled at his friend's weak attempt at humor and understanding. He should have known that Riley would not turn his back on him. Friends are forever.

"Thanks, man. Thanks."

**Part Thirty-One**

Southern California, like the rest of the United States, was gearing up for the biggest celebration of the year. With less than a week until the Fourth of July, the beaches and the highways were jammed to capacity with the influx of tourists seeking fun in the sun as they splashed in the ocean and reveled to the fireworks that celebrated the nation's independence.

While this date was still the chosen week for a family vacation, the nation felt a different response to the patriotic mood this year. With a growing awareness and unrest towards an unpopular war, the country was choosing more and more to turn away from the political side of the holiday and focus on the cook-outs, the camping and frolicky family fun.
As for the locals, they retreated away from the usual spots that were now overrun with strangers, and instead they chose to congregate in the coves and secluded beaches that the tourists had not yet found. This was where they would celebrate, together as a tight-knit group of friends that were more like family.

They had already begun to stack up the driftwood and debris that would fuel their traditional bonfire. They would light it after sundown on the fourth and keep the fire and the party going till the wee hours. There would be stolen beer, bags of chips and a few funny cigarettes passed discreetly from one to another.

It was what they had done since junior high. It was the same spot their parents had partied in when they were carefree students in Sunnydale High, and it was where their children would someday light fires of their own to ignite their paths into adulthood. It was the way it was.
Almost running down the path, Riley felt the seashells crunch under his feet as he rushed toward Sunset Cove. He wore a pair of jeans that he had cut off from school pants and an oil-stained wife beater. He reeked of sweat and gasoline from his job at the garage, yet he hadn't wasted the time it took to go home and change.

Since the day of Xander's startling announcement, Riley had been tied up working overtime almost every afternoon. He couldn't believe how many stupid people there were in the world. It seemed like common sense that you would check the tire pressure and oil level in your car before loading up the missus and the kiddies and driving to the coast for a family holiday, but apparently that wasn't a priority.

Ultimately, he was stuck getting these ignorant fools back on the road instead of helping his best buddy with his perplexing situation. Worse was the fear that Xander may think he was avoiding him because of said situation, which wasn't the case at all. Well, not entirely. Although the extra time did
give Riley a chance to mull it all over in his brain, and after three days of mulling he had come to the conclusion that Xan was still Xan.

Riley may never understand a dude's attraction for another set of same but it didn't change who Xander was. He was still Riley's solid. And he needed Riley's help. After talking on the phone last night, they had agreed to meet here this afternoon, away from where they would run into the girls, and devise a plan. Since Mr. Giles was not budging on giving Xander any information, they had decided that Riley would go.

They would meet, come up with an excuse, and Riley would see what information he could squeeze from the old man. It wasn't the most brilliant of plans, but it was all they had.

Panting from the run across the sand, Riley entered the cove and stopped. He turned in a full circle and looked all around but saw no sign of Xander. He had forgotten his watch at home but from the position of the sun, it was still early afternoon so he didn't
think he was late. He walked on toward the rocky coastline and the cave that was concealed there. Sticking his head in, he shouted and listened to the echo.

"XANDER....xander.....xander...xan...."

"Whoa. Dude! Damn. Don't yell like that when a bro is crashin'."

Oz came staggering out of the cave. His red hair was wild looking. It stuck straight up and was packed with wet sand. His clothes were disheveled and he could barely stay on his feet. The pupils of his eyes were blown wide and Riley was concerned. He had never seen Oz look this bad and wondered how much he had smoked to cause this type of reaction.

"Shit, Oz. You look like fuck. You OK? How much you had to smoke?"

Oz snickered as if that was the funniest thing he had heard all day and he took a step forward. When he did, he tripped, stumbled and nearly fell as Riley
lunged forward to catch him. Once upright, Oz took on a very serious expression and he fished into his pocket. When he pulled his hand out, he put a finger to his lips and looked all around to make sure they would not be overheard, which considering they were alone on a secluded beach was unlikely.


Oz opened his hand to reveal what he held. Riley stared, confused. "A sugar cube? I don't get it."

Oz wavered on his feet and scowled at Riley's ignorance.

"No. Not just a sugar cube. It's got a li'l drop of stuff on it and when you suck on it, POW! The whole fucking world comes to life. I swear to God, you can see things in a bright new light. It's un-fucking-believable! It's colors and shapes and even a demon or two. I think you can actually see into another dimension. You wanna try? You wanna give it a go?"
Oz stuck his hand out, offering the prize to his buddy, but Riley made no move to accept it. "Where did you get that shit?"

Oz growled and snatched it back. He stuck it into his pocket for later. If Riley was too stupid and ungrateful to realize what he had just passed up, then all the better for him.

"Hey. I ain't no fink. 'Sides, Angel told me to keep my mouth shut about who's sellin' this and I ain't sayin' nothing that would put the fuzz on my old pal Angel."

Riley shook his head in disgust. He would love to see the cops catch Angel and get him out of Sunnydale before he did some real harm, but it wouldn't be by Riley's hand. He wasn't a rat fink either. "Yeah, right. Hey, you haven't seen Xander around today have you? I was supposed to be meeting him here."

Oz staggered over to a rock and he squatted. He missed, fell to the sand, snickered and climbed back
up, taking a good three minutes before his ass and the rock came to a mutual understanding. "No, I ain't seen him but maybe he's with Spike over at the Shack."

Riley blinked. He knew Oz was stoned but that was a very specific comment even for a guy riding the bubble.

"What the fuck do you mean? Are you saying Spike has been hanging out at the Shack with the Franks? I don't believe it. Why the fuck would he go there?"

Oz rocked back and nearly tumbled off as he threw his hands up. "Damn, dude, major drama. Let's take it down a peg or two. All I know is that I was doing some....ah, I mean I stopped in for a burger after Sunday School and there was Spike. I seen him a couple times there. He's hanging with Penn and that chick, Faith. They's looking mighty cozy if ya know what I mean."

Riley was furious. He pointed a finger just inches from the end of Oz's nose. "You better not be lying
to me!"

He then turned around without waiting for an assurance or even a response, and he marched off. How could Spike do that. Very few people were welcomed into the inner circle as he had been. He had been accepted and looked at as one of them and what did he do? He threw it all away. He dumped a great guy like Xander, broke his heart and took up with a skank like Penn. A fucking Franklyn dickhead. That was just un-fucking-forgivable!

~*~*~*~*~

Xander leapt over the sand dune and hurried towards the cove. He knew he was running late but he just had to drive by Spike's house one more time. Unfortunately, the results were still the same, no sign of the blond boy that he missed so much. He had seen Mr. Giles sitting on his front porch with a dark-haired woman, and Xander's heart ached for the cool nights that he and Spike had cozied up on that same swing.
Marching toward the walkway, Riley all but ran into Xander coming the other way. Xander jolted to a stop to avoid the collision and he paused at the look of stark anger and determination on his friend's face. When he saw that Riley was not going to sit down and discuss the situation, Xander quickly fell into step behind.

"What's up? Where are we going?"

"We're going to get Spike back!"

Part Thirty-Two

"Jenny, my dear, I asked you over here tonight because I believe our relationship has become mired in certain misunderstandings and it is my wish that we keep everything open and above board at all times."
Jenny tucked her feet up and to the side as she scooted over, pressing her body as tightly against Rupert's as possible. The movement caused the porch swing to rock back and forth in an easy, not unpleasant manner that should have relaxed them both. "Of course, Rupe. I believe honesty is very important to an intimate relationship. So, Pookie, what's on that brilliant brain of yours?"

Rupert swallowed around the nervous lump lodged in his throat and he kept his gaze straight ahead. He knew if he looked into her soft brown eyes and gentle, sweet, unassuming face, he would not be able to have this conversation.

"Well, Jenny, dear, the fact is that this, um, situation between us has escalated at an alarming rate and I am certainly not accustomed to...um, Jenny, please remove your hand from my privates. It makes it very difficult to concentrate."

Jenny sighed, gave one last tubular squeeze and slowly dragged her hand across his thigh and off his
"Sorry Pookie. Although I must say, Pookie Jr. doesn't seem to be voicing any objections."

Rupert scooted around and as subtly as possible reached down and adjusted Pookie Jr.'s position in the now too-tight tweeds.

"Yes, and therein lies the problem. Pookie Jr. as you call him, often acts in a manner not wholly proper. Now, as I was saying, I have always been a man of great dignity and propriety and this, oh, oh, wherever did you learn to do that? No! No! I will not be distracted! Remove your talented fingers and lips immediately!"

Reluctantly, Jenny leaned back. She batted her eyes and her bottom lip poked out deliciously as her shoulders slumped in a whipped puppy look that sent waves of shame throughout Rupert's twitching body.

"Jenny dear, it's just that I am not a wild and loose person like you and, no, no, I was not making disparaging comments regarding your morals, I was
simply saying that...wait, let me try again. I was married for a long time, Jenny and I believe that certain behaviors are only appropriate within the marital confines. Therefore...."

"EEEEEE!!!! YES!! Oh, Rupert! I accept! Yes, I will marry you. Oh my, this was so unexpected! Quick, before William returns, let's go in the house and celebrate with a nice, engagement blow job. I'll even do that thing with my tongue that you like so much."

"ACK! Wait! I didn't...."

Rupert was jerked to his feet and nearly dragged back into the house. He wanted to protest. He wanted to stop this misunderstanding before it went any further. Unfortunately, Pookie Jr. had wants of his own and had ruthlessly stolen the blood from Pookie Sr.'s brain. Apparently, Rupert Giles was an engaged man.

~~*~*~*~*~
"Don't look up!"

"But how will I know if he's looking at me or not?"

Spike leaned back in the booth. He threw his arm over the back of the seat and he calmly sucked on the straw till the last of his chocolate shake disappeared from the glass. He then set it down and smiled at the boy sitting across from him.

"You can know he is staring at you because he is always staring at you. I'm telling you Penn, that fish is securely on the hook. All you need to do is reel him in."

Penn fidgeted nervously in his seat and fought the urge to turn around for confirmation. He had been trying to get Larry to notice him for years but the jock seemed oblivious. It wasn't until he began spending time with Spike that the green-eyed monster apparently took a bite out of Larry's plump ass. "This would be a whole lot easier if you would just be my boyfriend like I asked."
Spike leaned back and shook his head. "Nope. Never would have worked. We both like the big, beefy, athletic type and besides, we are much better as friends. Oh, oh, now he is really looking. Do that thing I showed you with the french fry. Hurry. Do it now."

Penn reached out with a shaky hand and slowly selected a long, firm fry. He swirled the tip in ketchup and slowly lifted it to his lips. Then, holding the potato slice in his fingertip he put the whole thing in his mouth and slowly drew it back out. When it was removed from his lips, the tip of his tongue darted out and flicked the last traces of catsup from the end. And he waited for his friend to report on the results.

It didn't take long. Instantly, Spike's eyes grew big and round as he hoarsely whispered, "Oh, fuck, here he comes."

"Uk!" *cough* *choke*
Penn struggled with the fry that was lodged in his throat, finally coughing it up as the huge, bulking shadow appeared at his side. When he looked up, Larry stood angrily with his hands on his hips.

"What the fuck is going on, Penn? Who the hell is this guy and what is he doing with my fella?"

Penn spun around in his seat as the outrage tinged his voice and expression.

"YOUR fella? YOUR fella? Why, Lawrence Watkins, you haven't given me two blinks or a fart in the ten years I have known you. What gives you the right to claim me now?"

Larry dropped his head in shame. His hands slid into his pockets and his foot scuffed the floor. This time when he spoke there was no menacing tone. "I just always assumed...I mean, I thought we had us an understanding. I was just about to tell you so but then this bum muscled in."

Larry turned his scowl on Spike who continued to
nonchalantly munch on his onion rings. Penn waited patiently to see who would break the standoff and claim the spoils. When it was beginning to appear that neither side would make the first move, Spike finally dabbed his napkin on his mouth and pushed his food away. "So, are you saying that you intend to date Penn and treat him in the manner that he deserves to be treated?"

Larry blinked. He then nodded as he glanced back and forth between Penn and his agent, Spike. Penn grinned like a loon and sat straight up in his seat at the big leap in progress, but Spike was not yet ready to turn his friend over. Instead, he pointed his finger directly at Larry's larger than necessary nose and Spike gave stern warning. "I'm going to be talking to Penn every day and if you do anything to hurt him, I swear, I will come after you with a baseball bat. You treat him with respect and kindness do you hear me?"

Larry's head flew up and down like a bobble-head as he realized how close he was to finally getting what he had always wanted. In truth, he had feared
rejection. He never dreamed someone as wonderful as Penn would give him a tumble. He now waited patiently for the next instruction.

Spike grinned smugly and handed Larry their check. "Fine, go pay the bill and then come back. When you do, you may sit beside him and if I am satisfied, then I will go and you two can be alone."

"Ack!" Larry snatched the slip of paper and charged toward the cash register.

Penn beamed. He reached across the table and took both of Spike's hands, squeezing them in affection and gratitude. "Oh, God, Spike, how can I ever thank you? Now, if we could just straighten out your love life."

Spike continued to grip his friend's hands, seeking consolation. "It's useless. I should have known better than to fall for a guy that had a girlfriend. Talk about red flags. Shit, I should have...."

"GET YOUR HANDS OFF OF HIM!"
Both boys jumped in their seats, released their entwined fingers and whirled around at the unexpected fury that was facing them.

"Xander? What...? How...?"

Xander was livid. Everything Riley had told him was true. The proof was right here in vivid, living color. "The least you could have done, Spike, was tell me that you were ditching me for...for...him. Didn't I deserve an explanation?"

Xander's nose wrinkled in disgust and his fingers waggled disdainfully in Penn's direction. By now, Spike had gained the gist of the situation and his own temper flared. "Bullshit! Go away, Xander. Leave me alone."

Xander had had enough. Reaching down, he clamped his fingers painfully around Spike's upper arm and he began to jerk him out of the booth. At the same time, Spike latched on to the table edge to anchor himself and the struggle began.
"Yes!"

"NO!"

"Let go of the damn table!"

"Fuck you!"

Before a clear winner could emerge, another booming voice startled them both.

"Get your fucking hands off him!"

Immediately, Xander released his hold and spun around. "Larry Watkins. Jesus fucking Christ, don't tell me you're boffing Spike too?"

"Hey! I resent that!"

Spike scrambled to get out of the booth, intent on confronting Xander nose to nose, but before he did, Larry's fist beat him to it. POW! Xander's ass hit the floor and within seconds he was back on his feet
and swinging. Like a flash of lightning, chaos broke out in the Snack Shack. The small, narrow aisles were packed with teens who cheered and shouted their encouragement as punches landed and dishes and pop bottles sailed through the air.

Suddenly, from somewhere within the mob, a cry of "COPS!" rose up and a mad scramble for the door began. Larry grabbed Penn and the two of them rushed out and into the night as a bruised and bloodied Xander grabbed Spike and ran for his mother's car, where Riley waited behind the wheel.

Shoving a struggling Spike into the back, Xander leapt in beside him and shouted, "GO! GO!" Just as the flashing lights and screaming sirens split through the night.

Part Thirty-Three
The engine roared to life. The tires squealed, spun and laid a good fifty feet of black tread on the pavement as the Ford made its fast and furious escape. In the rearview mirror, the fuzzmobile had just arrived and Officer Pitsenburger could be seen charging in the front door of the diner. Thanks to Riley's quick getaway, the Harris and Giles fathers would be spared the trip to the precinct to collect their boys.

Unfortunately, the passenger in the rear of the car was not yet ready to show his gratitude. He rapidly rolled down the window and hung his entire upper body out as he shouted, "Help! Help! I've been kidnapped! Summon the bobbies!"

Shocked, Xander latched on to the back of Spike's collar, and he snatched the boy back inside the car as he coughed and sputtered against the strangulation. After tumbling face-first onto Xander's lap, Spike popped back up, slapping wildly at his captor, swinging at Xander's bruised cheek and kicking at his legs.
Xander reacted by throwing his hands over his head, attempting to shield himself from the onslaught. Quickly, however, he shifted from a defensive player to offensive and he pounced. Throwing his greater weight on top of the smaller boy, Xander pinned him by the wrists and squished him against the passenger's side door. With their faces just inches apart, Xander held him immobile.

"Stop it! Stop acting like a fucking child! Stop it right now!"

Spike continued to struggle against the restraint. He wiggled and tugged, trying to free his arms and legs, but quickly realized it was pointless. He couldn't move. Instead, he went limp. He slumped, defeated and exhausted. "Fine. I'm done, now get off me you great lump. I can't fucking breathe."

Xander studied Spike's face for sincerity. What he saw was defeat and, worse, hurt. When it seemed that all the fight was gone from him, slowly Xander eased off and he released his grip. Spike made no move to renew his attack.
Up front, Riley drove like an expert. Fast enough to make it back to their side of town as quickly as possible but close enough to the speed limit to avoid detection by the fuzz. He kept his hands at ten and two on the wheel and his eyes darted between the pavement ahead and the scene in the mirror behind. What he saw was Xander sitting in the center of the back seat scowling at Spike and Spike huddled up against the door, curled into a ball.

With a snort of disgust, Xander shook his head. "Stop acting like a princess. I'll have Riley drop you at your house and you can call your girlfriend, Penn, to come and get you. After that I won't be bothering you again."

Spike snapped. He unfolded his arms and legs and he spun around on the cheap pleather seat to face his accuser. "How dare you! You have a lot of nerve! You lead me on and all the time you and Cordelia are playing hide the salami. You are a cad, Xander Harris! You are a two-timing cad."
Xander blinked, and confusion replaced anger. He shook his head and scratched the back of his neck. "What the fuck are you talking about? You're the one cheating and besides, you knew about Cordelia."

Spike's arms crossed over his chest and his eyes narrowed to slits. "I was NOT cheating. Penn is my friend. JUST my friend and, yes, I knew that you and Cordy were a thing before I came to town, I just didn't realize that you were still poking her every night as soon as you got rid of me."

Riley's eyebrows shot up as he again glanced into the rearview mirror. He watched Xander's face and he recognized the moment the low wattage light bulb came to light over his friend's head. In response, Riley took a right turn and changed destinations.

Xander's expression softened and his body leaned forward. "Spike, Cordy and I aren't having sex. We never did. Who told you that?"
Spike blinked. Xander's simple declaration took his breath and filled him with hope. Was it true? What would Xander gain by lying? Why would Cordy lie? It didn't make sense. Still, the honesty and sincerity were there in Xander's swollen, black-and-blue eye.

Spike leaned in, and a great measure of the tension in his body melted away. Neither boy noticed the car jostling as it moved from the smooth blacktop to the gravel access road.

"Cordy told me. We were all over at Buffy's to paint our toenails and Cordy said that you and her have sex all the time."

"You painted your toenails?"

The mental image of Spike's long, thin feet and toes capped in bright red polish sent an unexpected shiver of arousal through Xander's body. He had an overwhelming urge to slip the Keds off Spike's feet, peel off the white tube sock and reverently place one of his feet on Xander's lap. He would then
massage that naughty little foot. He would separate the toes, tug them firmly, one at a time as each little piggy went to market and then found its way home. He would slide his fingers between the toes and in a firm, fast move, crack each one before....

Spike stared into the heated face of passion and his own dick moved in his jeans as an influx of blood began to fill and fatten it.

"Xan?"

Before the mental pedisex pictures could become overwhelming, the car came to a sudden, near-whiplash stop, stirring up a cloud of dust that barreled in the back windows. Both faces snapped toward the driver and Riley grinned as he threw the shifter into 'P'.

"Well I think you two are past wanting to kill each other so this is where I get out. We're at the back entrance to Hay's junk yard. Nobody uses this lane so you won't be disturbed if you want to have a good...talk. It's less than a mile to my house and a
nice night for a walk. Call me tomorrow, Xan. We're just a few days from the contest and if you don't wear yourself out, we could use the practice."

Spike blushed hotly at the implication and the blatant way Xander thanked his friend then hustled him quickly from the car. As soon as the driver had gone, Xander turned all his attention back to his passenger. Spike's hand ghosted over the swollen bruised cheek.

"So you and Cordy never...?"

Xander grabbed Spike's thighs roughly and he pulled causing Spike to slide down with his back flat on the seat and his head against the door. Spike gasped as he stared up into the hungry face above him. "We never. I swear. News flash, Spike. Girls talk shit to impress each other too."

Spike wiggled his butt. He threw one leg over the back seat and the other foot rested on the floor. It was cramped. It was uncomfortable and it was heaven. Carefully, Xander lowered his weight down
to press Spike into the cheap imitation leather and both boys groaned.

Then, looking down into the sweet face of his boy, Xander frowned and stopped.

Spike whined his frustration. His hands were flat on Xander's chest and he wanted to rip the shirt open, listening to the melodic sound of the buttons pinging off the windows, but now there seemed to be a problem. His stomach tightened at the thought that Xander was changing his mind. "Xan?"

"Spike, I...I don't know what to do. I've never...with a boy."

Spike chuckled with relief. He quickly unbuttoned Xander's shirt and pushed it open wide. His small fingers danced over the straining muscles and teased the dark hair as he spoke in a quiet, encouraging voice. "I like the same things Cordy likes. I like to be touched. I want to be kissed. I want to feel our bare skin rubbing. Fuck, Xan, you are so warm. I want all that heat on me."
"Yeah, me too. Can we get off? I'm so fucking hard when I'm with you. What do we do?"

Spike wormed his hands down between them and he fumbled with both their zippers. When Xander realized what he was doing, he raised his hips as high as he could while still hovering over the prone body. It seemed to take forever. Nothing on earth was as important right now as getting their dicks out of their pants and Xander was losing patience fast.

Just as he was about to climb off his boy and do the job himself, it happened. That first amazing feel of Spike's small hand wrapping around Xander rigid, hot cock, and it rocked him to his very foundation. His whole body lurched and his arms gave out, causing him to drop to his elbows. It was the perfect position.

Their lips met in what started as a tentative, closed-mouth peck. When Spike's squished hand lined their dicks up together, the tingle surged up
through Xander's spine and shot out his mouth, causing his lips to part and his tongue to plunge into Spike's.

His boy tasted like sweet chocolate. His tongue swiped the roof of Spike's mouth then tried to find his tonsils. His body rocked and humped to increase the pressure and friction on their cocks. The position was maddeningly inadequate even with Spike's fingers rubbing and stroking.

To Spike, the restricted movements of his fingers were only becoming an obstacle and with much tugging and pulling, he finally wrenched his hand free. Immediately, his hips pushed upward while his butt squiggled from side to side. His fingers no longer lovingly mapped out the curves and muscles of Xander's chest, instead they now scratched long, red welts into his skin as his passion level rose.

Still, Xander kept grinding as his body sought sweet relief. He didn't care that Spike could barely breathe. He didn't care that his entire one hundred and sixty-five pounds were crushing down on the
smaller boy. He couldn't think. He couldn't hear the grunts or gasping curses and it didn't matter which of them was cursing. His ears rang and his head hurt.

And he was close. His stomach was clenched and his bowels churned. His nuts were full and beginning to draw tight. Just more. A little more. Something else.

The night outside was pitch black and cool. The breeze through the open vent caused goose bumps to raise on their sweaty skin. The windows were heavily fogged and the only sounds were the chirping crickets outside and the muttered grunts and rapid panting inside.

Suddenly, Xander heard Spike cry out. He opened his eyes and looked into the face of shock and awe as he felt the rush of warm, wet spunk spill onto his own rock-hard erection and that was what it took. Electricity snapped down his backbone and every muscle in his body locked as he arched up.

"OH FUCK!"
Then, Xander's face fell against Spike's neck. His sweaty hair stuck to the side of Spike's face and Xander unloaded. His cock gave one violent jerk, followed by several rhythmic shrugs as spurt after spurt of thick, stringy cum pumped out, soaking both their pants and running into Spike's open jeans. As the spasms eased and the well finally ran dry, Xander became aware of Spike cooing soft words of love in his ear as gentle hands caressed his back.

With what little strength he had left, Xander rolled off and flopped onto the floor. "Wow!"

Spike laid like a limp rag. One arm fell across his forehead and he chuckled.

"Well, that's an understatement."
Part Thirty-Four

Xander bolted up the stairs as quickly and quietly as possible. He was late. He was more than thirty minutes past curfew but apparently this time he was going to skate. His parents had already gone to bed and hopefully they would never know. It also meant that he would avoid any interrogations about his puffy black eye until tomorrow.

What a night! He grinned like a loon at all the strange twists and turns the day had taken. He bounced on bare feet and felt as if he were walking on air. Not even the painful removal of the underwear that had adhered to his pubic hair could dampen his mood. It did, however, cause him to contemplate the similarities of dried spunk and Elmer's Glue. He chuckled as he pictured Spike dealing with the same situation.

Spike. As soon as the name popped into his mind, Xander shivered with glee. He looked at the small
clock on his bed stand and he wondered. No, he told himself. It's too late. But the compulsion was too great. He slipped on his sleep pants and he crept from his room.

Pausing outside his parents' closed door, he pressed his ear against the wood and he strained to hear any sound. Nothing. Another minute. Still nothing. They were sound asleep. Yes! He fist-pumped the air and rushed back down the steps to the small alcove outside the kitchen. There, he raised the receiver off the hook, stuck his finger in the first round hole and he began to dial. On the last number, he braced himself. If an angry father picked up, he would hang up and run to bed but if....

"'ello?"

The voice that answered was quiet, whispery and sounded as if it had been patiently waiting.

"Hi. I just got home. Did I wake you up?"
"No. I was hoping you would call. I miss you."

*giggles* "I just dropped you off about fifteen minutes ago."

*pouts* "It's been a long fifteen minutes."

"Yeah, it has."

"Hey, Xan?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you came and got me."

"Me too. Damn. I missed you like crazy. Will you be at the beach in the morning?"

"I will if you let me get some sleep tonight."

"I'm tired too. You hang up first."

"No. You hang up."


"I'll count to three and we'll hang up together."

"OK."

"One. Two. Three."

"Did you hang up?"

*giggles* "No, you hang up first."

Tony Harris groaned and rolled over in bed to face his wife. He tried to ignore her bright eyes and beaming smile as he mumbled and bitched.

"For the love of God, somebody please hang up first so we can all get some sleep."

Jessica playfully swatted her husband on the shoulder and scolded him.

"Stop being such a mister grouchy-pants. I think it's wonderful that Xanny and Cordelia have made up. Haven't you seen how unhappy he's been the last
few days? Besides, it hasn't been that many years ago that you used to call a certain young lady after a date just to say good-night."

"Yeah, but you never caught me so it doesn't count."

"Why you!!"

Jessica pounced. She threw herself on her laughing husband and proceeded to tickle him till he stopped her the only way he could. The only way she wanted. He flipped her over onto her back and kissed her within an inch of her life. Suddenly, sleep didn't seem so important.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander closed his eyes and tipped his head back. He listened to the non-stop roar of the crashing waves. He felt the gritty sand between his bare toes and he reveled in the warm breeze that ruffled his too-long hair. The sun had, only moments earlier, peeked
over the horizon and Xander felt newly born.

"It's going to be a great day."

The boy beside him nodded his blond head and smiled as though the peace of the world had settled over his shoulders. "It is. I don't think I have ever seen the waves that big."

Xander smiled and he reached over for the hand that fit so perfectly in his. When their fingers brushed and Spike realized what Xander was about to do, he pulled his hand back. Xander opened his eyes and looked questioningly at the perceived rejection.

"Xan, we have to be careful. People don't understand."

Xander was startled by the wake-up call. Spike was right, of course. Still, it was confusing. His feelings were as strong and his excitement as real as any other boy caught up in the throes of infatuation. Why did they have to pretend? Why couldn't they
do what any other couple did? Who made the silly rules?"

Spike saw all the conflicting emotions as they played across his boyfriend's face and he knew the pain and bewilderment first hand. It was hard and it was unfair, but it was the way it was. Hopefully, some day society would be advanced and enlightened enough to accept a love like theirs. Spike smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry about it. There are other ways. They can't stop us from being together. Now, come on, you owe me a lesson."

Xander laughed with relief. He gripped the hem of his tee shirt and jerked it off over his head. When he did, he heard Spike gasp. Gently, Xander ran his hands down over the raised red welts on his chest and he turned his passion-hungry eyes on his boy. Spike stared at the marks.

"Did I do that?"

"Yeah and it's gonna sting like a bitch when that salt water hits it. I can't fucking wait."
With that, he grabbed his board, let out a war whoop and ran for the edge of the ocean where the waves exploded on the shore. He threw in his board and waited as Spike expertly flopped on. Immediately, Xander climbed on top of him and he groaned at the intimacy. He ground his growing erection into Spike's butt as he began to paddle out. He was right. The salt sting was just painful enough to recall the memory of how the scratches got there and Xander was soon close to adding a little white foam of his own to the Pacific's.

Teasingly, Spike would slightly hump his ass upward to increase the pressure of his body against Xander's raging erection while Spike's own dick was squished against the wood of the board. Once they were away from the shore and the few eyes that were on the beach this early in the morning, Xander felt he could control himself no longer.

He stopped paddling and gripped the edge of the board as the ocean slapped and swamped them repeatedly. He tucked his face down against the
crook of Spike's neck and he nibbled. He kissed the boy's ear and he licked a salty strip across his shoulder.

"Oh, fuck, Spike. Jesus, the things I want to do to you."

Spike arched up and moaned. He held his breath as the ocean rose and drenched them and he sucked in air as it ebbed and fell. All the time he listened to the deliciously dirty words being whispered in his ear and he desperately sought a way to relieve himself. Xander understood that need and he and his own hard cock had a plan.

"Listen, next time a wave lifts us, slip your hand underneath yourself and into your trunks. I'm gonna do the same cause if I don't jerk off, I think my nuts might just explode."

Spike whined and nodded. He tipped his head to the side to encourage Xander to resume his neck attentions and he impatiently waited for the rising tide. He didn't have long to wait as moments later, a
particularly rough wave slammed into them. Both boys gripped the board to maintain their balance then rapidly released and shifted their hold on a different sort of wood.

Together, yet separately, they stroked. With his knee braced on the board, Xander lifted himself off Spike just enough to get his hand in his shorts. The instant his fingers wrapped around his shaft, he grunted and jerked before falling into a familiar and well-practiced rhythm.

Spike, beneath him, was already rocking in a regular, rabbit fast pattern that spoke of need and speed and insatiable teen-aged hormones. Xander did his best to compete although the power of the waves interfered with his concentration. Shaking the water from his hair, Xander dropped his face and he put all he had into the serious task of getting off.

It was an effort well done. Within minutes, he felt his nuts tingle and ache as they prepared to shoot a load of froth and foam that would compete with
anything the Pacific Ocean could stir around them. Below him, he suddenly felt Spike's body stiffen as his legs quivered convulsively.

Xander gave two more pulls on his rock-hard shaft and a squeeze on the fat, swollen head. It was like pulling the trigger on a gun as the barrel of his dick fired and shot wad after wad of cum toward the hungry, waiting fish.

"AAHH! Fuuck. Oh, fuck, Spike!"

The orgasms were teeth rattling and earth shaking. They were bone melting and they were stupidly careless. Distracted and sated, neither boy was prepared when the next huge wave slammed into them and washed them off the board.

Xander broke the surface of the water first and he struggled to tread water as the power of the ocean rocked him repeatedly, reminding the puny human who was in charge. He sputtered and he spit fishy water from his mouth and nose as he turned in all directions, his eyes stinging with salt and squinting
against the rising sun.

"SPIKE!! SPIKE!!"

Xander screamed and sobbed but still there was no sign of the other boy. Suddenly, to his left, his board bobbed to the surface and rolled, bumping against him as the tide surged and exploded in whitecaps.

"SPIKE! SPIKE!!"

Straining, he shook the water from his face as he caught a glimpse of something off color. Something not white or blue. Something not Pacific. Quickly, he turned and frantically swam as hard as he could to reach it. It was the back of a very blond head and it floated, face down on the surface of the water, tossed about like a buoy.

Immediately, Xander gripped the boy's shoulders and he flipped him over. The eyes were closed and the face impassive. Xander didn't waste time checking for a pulse or respiration. He wrapped his
arm around the limp body and he began to swim for shore.

Part Thirty-Five

Willow and Buffy had just arrived on the beach. They headed for their usual spot and were unsurprised to find Xander's shorts, towel and shoes in a discarded heap. They were also pleasantly delighted to see Spike's things intermingled with Xan's.

Chatting happily about the upcoming holiday, the girls spread their blanket and stretched out in the sun. They shared a bottle of tanning lotion and prepared to bake the day away.

"Looks like Spike's back. I wondered what happened to him."
Willow nodded her agreement as she tied her long red hair up in a pony tail. She tugged her one-piece out of the crack of her ass and she laid her head on a rolled-up towel. "Yeah, after he ran out of your room the other day, he has been very low key but, shit, with all the excitement of the Fourth, I knew he would be back."

Buffy leaned back on her elbows and crossed her legs at the ankles. "I wonder how they celebrate the Fourth in his old home in London? You know, fireworks? Bonfires? Picnics?"

Willow scrunched up her face and glanced over to see if her friend was joking or if she was really that stupid. She wasn't joking. "Buff, the Fourth of July is only an American holiday. They don't have the Fourth in England."

Buffy lifted her sunglasses off her nose and blinked. "Gee, that's weird. So they like go from the third to the fifth? Do they have specially made calendars for that?"
"What?"

"Well, I should have known you two would be here."

Thankfully distracted from her urge to bitch-slap the ignorance out of her friend, Willow and Buffy both looked up at the newest arrival. "Hey, Cordy. What are you doing out this early?"

Cordelia dropped her straw beach bag on the sand and kicked off her flip-flops.

"I'm trying to catch Xander. He's been like the invisible man lately. Every time I call his house, his mom says he's out and when I go to the Chatterbox, they say they haven't seen him. I feel like he's avoiding me or something."

Buffy sat up and patted a corner of the blanket for Cordelia to sit down. When she did, Buffy took both her hands reassuringly. "Don't be a poop, Cordy. Xan is just over the top with this surfing competition tomorrow. Riley has been the same
way. It doesn't mean squat. When it's all over he'll be back in your arms and attached to your lips like always. Besides, he's here so as soon as...."

"BUFFY! CORDY! LOOK!!"

The girls turned to find Willow on her feet. She had been pointing off into the breaking surf and was now rushing toward the crashing waves. It took only a moment to see what she had seen and, with a cry of desperation, they took off at a dead run too. By the time they reached the shoreline, Xander was crawling and dragging Spike's limp body from the ocean.

"HELP ME!"

Immediately Willow and Buffy grabbed Spike's arms and dragged him onto the beach and out of the water. As his panic-induced adrenalin overrode his exhaustion, Xander fell to Spike's side and he began the CPR he had been taught in Boy Scouts.

As the drama continued to play out, a crowd quickly
surrounded them, horrified at what was happening. Someone brought a blanket. A young child began to cry and still Xander continued his chest compressions and steady breaths into the boy's unresponsive mouth. His arms ached and his lungs burned from the effort, but Xander swore that he would never stop. Not as long as there was even the slightest chance.

Then it happened.

Spike's body jerked. His eyelids fluttered and he began to gag. Quickly, Xander rolled him over on his side and Spike heaved and vomited. Great volumes of sea water mixed with stomach bile and Cheerios gushed from him to pool in the sand as the crowd cheered and Xander sobbed with relief. Buffy threw the blanket over Spike's back as he continued to retch.

Willow, too fell to her knees and she petted Spike's head while she implored the crowd, "Please, someone call an ambulance!" The blanket lady took off in the direction of the pay phones next to the
concession stand.

Cordelia stood by with a look of shock on her face as she watched her boyfriend drape himself over Spike's back and rock and cry. Gradually, as the drama on the beach seemed to lose its appeal, the crowd dispersed and went about their own business of fun and frolic. After what seemed like hours, the sound of sirens split the air and Spike was whisked away.

Willow promised to contact Mr. Giles.

Over the objections of the paramedics, Xander climbed into the ambulance with Spike and refused to leave. He was given a towel with which to clean some of the sand off his damp body and he rejected all offers to have his swollen black eye or scratched chest checked.

Now, he paced the small waiting area outside the emergency room.

Minutes after they arrived, Rupert Giles came
charging in, demanding to see his son. He was ushered through the double doors and disappeared down a hallway. Xander was nearly frantic with worry. After pacing for the hundredth time, the doors again flew open and the girls rushed in. Willow tossed Xander his tee shirt and shorts which he quickly pulled on.

"Have you heard anything?"

"No. Damn. What the hell is going on in there?"

Cordelia crossed her arms over her chest and she tried to read Xander's face. He had always seemed so cold and emotionless. Till now. Finally, she spoke calmly and clearly. "How about you two go look for a cup of coffee. I need to talk to Xander privately for a minute."

Buffy wrinkled her nose.

"Coffee? Yuck! Who drinks.... Hey, damn, Willow stop shoving!"
Then they were alone. Cordelia stepped in front of Xander, blocking his path of pacing the room. When he tried to step around her she moved to prevent any attempt to ignore her. Finally, with a huff, he stopped.

"What?"

"That's my question exactly. What the hell is going on, Xander? How did you get the black eye, and those fucking scratches on your chest better not be what I think they are. Please, Xander talk to me."

Cordelia placed a hand on Xander's arm and it felt like worms crawling on his skin. Immediately he recoiled in disgust and he jerked away. He was not in the mood for this. He was not in the mood for her. "Not now, Cordelia. Damn, Spike is in there. Nothing matters right now but Spike. I just need to see him and make sure he's all right. I just need to be with him. You and I can talk later."

"NO, Xander. NOW! I'm worried about Spike too but it isn't the end of the world. He was conscious. You
revived him. You act lik.... Oh, my God."

Cordelia took a step back. Her arms hung limply at her sides and she searched his face for truth in the form of denial. She prayed he would laugh or, better, be outraged at such a ridiculous implication. When his only reaction was diverted eyes and silence, she slapped her hands over her mouth and she spun around. Looking at him now was impossible. Whe she spoke next, her voice was low out of fear she may be overheard by polite society. "That's sick. Good people don't do things like that. Why, Xander, why? Men only do that if they can't get a woman. I offered. It still isn't too late. Oh God. Oh God."

Xander walked over and gently placed his hands on her shoulders. It really did hurt him to break her heart like this, and after the last few days, he knew what it was like to want someone who didn't want you back.

"Cordy, I'm so sorry. I don't understand it either. It doesn't have anything to do with what's in his
drawers or yours, it's him. There's just something about him that draws me like a magnet. I still love you. I have always loved you, but it's in the way I love Willow and Buffy. I love you all like sisters. Spike. Spike is different. When I look at him...."

His inflection and tone turned dreamy in a way that mocked her own as she used to speak of her imaginary wedding. Now it sounded taunting and cruel.

"Stop it! Please. I don't want to hear any more. I don't feel well. I think I'm going to be sick. I gotta go. I can't...."

Cordelia twitched her shoulder away from his touch and she headed for the door just as Buffy and Willow returned. Buffy held up two cups proudly.

"Hey, look. We found co.... What's going on? Are we leaving? Does Xander want the coffee?"

Willow grabbed the cups and set them on a small table. She kissed Xander on the cheek and latched
onto Buffy's hand, pulling her out the door to follow Cordelia who was all but running from the hospital. Before Xander had the chance to explore the implications of what had just happened, the inside doors opened and the doctor stepped in.

"Xander Harris?"

"Yes, yes that's me. How is he? What's happening?"

"Calm down, son. Your friend is fine. I understand you are quite a hero. If it wasn't for you, he wouldn't be alive. He's asking for you. Do you want to see him?"

Xander was overcome with emotion and the tears of relief stung his eyes. He was no hero, especially considering it was his fault that Spike had nearly died. It was a revelation that cut him down to his very soul.

Too choked up to speak, Xander just nodded.

**Part Thirty-Six**
Xander hurried after the doctor who led him down the hall in search of his precious Spike. The reverent silence of the hospital's corridors was crudely violated by the repeated 'clack, clack, clack' as Xander's flip-flops slapped against his bare heels on each step.

It seemed like a catacomb, and Xander wished he had left a trail of bread crumbs to help him find his way back. Just as he was beginning to think the doctor had forgotten he was in trail, the man stopped so suddenly, Xander nearly collided with his back.

"Here we are. Your friend is in here. We have checked him from head to toe and, other than a few bumps and bruises, he is in fine shape. In fact, he can go home in a little while. You did a good job, son. A really good job."

Xander grudgingly accepted the doctor's pat on the back and praise despite knowing the truth. It made him physically sick to think how different the outcome may have been. Instead of visiting Spike in
a soft bed wearing a hospital gown, he could just as easily have had to view a cold body on a metal table sporting a snappy toe tag. It was a thought that sent waves of nausea through Xander's stomach.

After the doctor walked away, Xander placed his palm on the door. What if Spike was furious and never wanted to see Xander again? He had almost lost his boy twice now. Would this be the final straw? Xander shook his head as he realized he wouldn't blame Spike if it was. Unable to postpone it any longer, he took a deep breath, held his head up high and he walked into the room.

Immediately, Rupert rushed over and took Xander's right hand in both of his, shaking it vigorously as he spoke. "Xander, my boy. What you did.... How can I ever thank you? William is my world. My son is all...."

Too choked up to continue, Rupert tightened his grip on Xander's hand as he jerked the boy forward into a bear hug and a vigorous back pat. Xander was speechless. Then, just as unexpectedly as it began,
it ended and Rupert sniffled as he released his son's savior. "I need to go sign some release forms at the nurses' desk. I trust you will keep William company until I return? Perhaps we can give you a ride on our way home?"

Xander nodded dumbly. To be honest, he had expected Spike's father's reaction to him to be more on the lines of tar and feathers than hearts and flowers. Apparently the scales tipped in favor of saving his son's life rather than putting that same life in peril in the first place.

Alone at last. Xander turned to Spike, who was sitting up in bed with a bright beaming smile on his face that washed through Xander with a grateful relief, and he rushed to the bedside. Immediately, Xander scooped Spike up in his arms. The minute he felt warm skin against warm skin Xander broke down. The overwhelming magnitude of what could have happened slammed into him like a sledgehammer and he began to cry.

Alarmed at his lover's emotional state, Spike at first
tried to coo and soothingly rub Xander's back, whispering words of reassurance and affection. Soon, however, he couldn't help himself and his own smaller body began to tremble. Feeling the boy shake and hearing the muffled words, Xander stilled. Slowly, he drew back and took Spike's face in his hands.

That was when he realized. Spike wasn't crying. He was laughing. No, he wasn't just laughing he was howling. He was rolling. When he saw Xander's concerned face, Spike gasped and tried to regain control. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I know you are upset but damn, Xan, I haven't cum that hard since the first time I saw a picture of Fabian in a swim suit."

Xander wrenched upright with a look of horrified outrage on his face. "Wait. What? Spike, don't you realize what happened? Don't you know what this means?"

Spike flopped back in the bed. He tucked his hands under his head and he wiggled his toes. "Yes, it means that from now on, we will only shag on dry
land."

Xander put his fists on his hips and mentally prepared a stern admonishment. Gradually, however, the corner of his mouth twitched upward. Before he could stop himself, he too was laughing as much with relief as humor and together they hooted. As they cracked morbid jokes and inappropriate puns, Spike scooted over and Xander climbed onto the bed with him.

Slowly, the exuberance ebbed as the effort to laugh wore Spike out. His body was exhausted. The monumental trip from life to death and back again had taken its toll and he yawned. Carefully, Xander lifted Spike's upper body into his arms and he squirmed around until the blond head was cradled against the firm, muscular chest. He hummed and ran his fingers through the pale curls as he felt Spike's body go limp and he dozed off.

And that was how Rupert found them when he returned. It wasn't the fact that they were lying together in the narrow bed that concerned him, and
it wasn't even the fact that they were obviously cuddling. Either of those things could be chalked up to the emotion of the day or even the bond forged through saving of a life. No, what hit home to Rupert was the expressions on both the boys' faces.

It was satisfaction. It was contentment. Dear Lord. It was love.

Quietly, he stepped in and closed the door behind him. His voice was low and whispy so not to wake Spike.

"Is he asleep?"

Xander started. He hadn't noticed the older man's return and he could only imagine what they must look like. He quickly eased off the bed while sliding his arm out from under the sleeping boy. When he did, the breaking of physical contact stirred Spike awake.

"Huh? Wha? Oh, Da. Are we ready to go home?"
Rupert watched his young son as he rubbed his sleepy eyes. His curly hair stuck up all over his head and the oversized hospital gown made him look much smaller than he really was. He then looked between his son and a slightly guilty-looking boy hanging very close to the bed and Rupert realized that his son was not a child anymore.

For each parent, that moment of realization comes at a different time. It isn't necessarily a separation, but it is an understanding that the cord is no longer connected. That child has reached a point of independence. For the parent, it is a moment of grieving. A moment of painful letting go and a moment of immense pride.

William was becoming a man.

Rupert smiled sadly. "Yes, Will, we have signed the release forms and we are free to go. Since the only clothing you had with you was wet and sandy, the hospital has suggested you wear the gown and pants that you have on. They are sending an orderly with a chair to take you out to the car. In fact, if
Xander here would be so good as to escort you as they wheel you out, I will collect the car and meet you two at the door."

Xander stood tall and straight beside Spike's bed and he nodded. "Yes sir. You can count on me. I will get him ready and we will see you outside."

Rupert turned and walked away. He strode toward the exit and he made his way to the car park. This was not the future he wanted for his son and the implications were frightening. There would be no grandchildren. It would be a life of secrets and society disapproval. Still, if Rupert had any say in it, his son would be happy. He would be loved unquestioningly and from the looks of Xander Harris, William would be well cared for.

"Take it easy. Gently. Careful!"

Spike chuckled as Xander continued to hover and bark orders at the orderly who was simply trying to load and wheel the boy out of the room. It was not major surgery and the boy certainly appeared to
have been able to walk on his own, but the hospital had regulations and the orderly had his job. Apparently part of that job was to put up with obnoxious visitors and family members.

Within minutes, Spike was shifted into the back seat of the car and Xander climbed in beside him. Slowly, Giles pulled from the lot and out onto the street. He balanced his attention between the street ahead and the scene in the back seat. He watched with interest as Xander fussed over William, assuring his comfort and inquiring to any needs. He saw the bigger boy brush the hair off William's forehead and he couldn't miss the expression of contentment on William's face.

Giles rounded the corner and headed for home where Jenny had promised to have a light lunch waiting. And wasn't that another conversation that was waiting to be had?

"William, I hope you understand that this means you cannot go into the water again for at least two weeks."
Spike shot up in his seat. The comment from his father had been a splash of cold water. "What? Da, no! The big Fourth of July holiday is day after tomorrow and all of the gang will be swimming and celebrating. Besides, it's the day of the big surfing competition."

Xander slipped his hand over Spike's, careful to keep it out of the driver's line of sight, and he squeezed the slim fingers. "Hey, your dad is right. Besides, there's plenty to do on shore. We're all meeting in the cove in the morning before the surfing sign in, then I'll need you to be on the beach cheering Riley and me on. As long as you're there, that's what's important."

Spike smiled sweetly and squeezed Xander's hand. "I'll be there. Wild horses couldn't keep me away."
Part Thirty-Seven

Rupert Giles glanced over at his son in the passenger's seat and he worried again that he was doing the wrong thing. William had slept peacefully the night before and his appetite this morning had appeared normal. When questioned repeatedly as to his well-being, the boy had, with great annoyance in his tone, assured his father that he was fine and fully recovered.

Still, Rupert was hesitant to leave him on his own. Unfortunately, despite the fact that it was the third of July, he still had matters that needed his attention in his office at the university. Unwilling to leave the boy unattended, they had finally come to the resolution that William would spend the four hours at the Harris residence under the watchful eye of Jessica Harris. William had insisted that he did not need a babysitter, but his father would not be swayed.
With the decision made, Rupert had spoken to her at length on the phone and inquired as to her qualifications. She had assured him that she had limited training as a nurse's assistant and could indeed make chicken noodle soup from a condensed can. With reservations, Rupert agreed and they were on their way.

"Oh, I believe I forgot to mention, Jenny is fixing us a special dinner tonight. Tacos and burritos. Won't that be lovely?"

Spike snickered. "Tacos? I don't like tacos. Can't we just have something simple like hot dogs?"

Rupert tapped his fingers in annoyance on the wheel and wondered again why the boy had to argue every single point. "Really, William, she is going to a lot of trouble for us and I think the least you could do is to make the effort to eat what she has prepared."

Spike turned his head away and rolled his eyes. The old man could be super dense sometimes. Made
him wonder what Miss Calendar saw in him and why she wanted to hang around so much.

Within minutes, Rupert pulled up to the curb. He switched off the engine and he turned to the boy. He then launched into a list of don'ts that Spike had already heard a hundred times that morning.

"Now don't forget, I don't want you out in the sun and you must not exert yourself. If you feel tired, Mrs. Harris said you could rest on their sofa. If you feel light-headed you should tell her immediately and she will phone me. She has my number as well as a list of emergency contacts. Now, she has promised to fix you some lunch promptly at noon so your blood sugar doesn't drop too...."

Spike flopped limply in his seat. His head smacked against the passenger's window and his tongue lollied from the side of his mouth. His hands waved limply in front of him and he moaned and groaned loudly, which had the desired effect of silencing his father.
Rupert sighed at his son's histrionics. "Yes, well, point taken. Regardless, I think...."

"Gotta go, Da. Bye."

Before Rupert could outline any further admonishments, the car door slammed and his son rushed happily across the sidewalk, through the yard and up to the front porch. Rupert waited until the door was opened and the boy safely inside before he sighed and drove away.

After warmly welcoming him in, Jessica Harris ran her fingers through Spike's hair as she gave him a good look-over. He seemed very well. Much better than she expected after speaking to his father this morning on the phone. She had almost anticipated a near invalid. "Well, Spike. How are you doing? You seem much better."

Spike all but purred at the feel of the woman's motherly petting. It was one of the things he had missed and been envious of growing up. His father had been wonderful, but he always wondered what
he had missed without a woman in his life. "I'm great. No side effect. No fins growing off my back. No webbing between my toes. I guess the ocean didn't win this time."

Jessica was slightly taken aback at the light-hearted way in which he viewed his near death. "We certainly hope not! We would all be very upset if anything happened to you. Now, when I talked to your father, he made it clear that he did not want you to do anything strenuous. He does not want you riding in a car and he doesn't think...."

"My Da is a spaz."

Jessica Harris snorted at the accurate description of the straight-laced British gentleman. Still, he was a single parent with his child's best interest at heart and she certainly could not fault him for that. "Nevertheless, we must respect his wishes. So, Xan is up in his room, why don't you go on up and see what he's up to?"

Spike grinned and spun around on his heel. He
launched himself at the stairway and leaped up, taking the steps two at a time as Jessica shouted after him, "Don't run! Your father doesn't want you to run!"

Spike hit the upstairs landing and darted to the left. He ran into the room, leapt and landed with a bounce on Xander's bed. The object of his affection was standing quietly by his dresser with a letter in his hand. When Spike came in, Xander quickly stuffed the paper back in the envelope. The look on Xander's face gave Spike pause.

"What'cha got there?"

Xander huffed and continued to stare at the object in his hand as though it were something foreign and frightening. "It's a birthday card. You know tomorrow is my birthday."

Spike grinned and leered evilly. "Oh, yes. I remembered. I have something special planned for your birthday. Sort of a surprise party for two."
When he saw that the innuendo was not being accepted in the spirit given, the smile fell from Spike's lips and he sat up. "Who is the card from?"

"My Uncle Sam."

Spike tipped his head to the side and was certain that he still didn't have the answer he was seeking. "Yeah? I have an Uncle Milton back in London. He gives me five pounds in a card each year. He has a moustache like Hitler and a.... Oh. That isn't the kind of uncle you mean, is it? Can I see?"

Xander handed the letter to Spike and he sat on the bed beside him, waiting as his boyfriend opened and read it. The heading on the paper was a colorful circle with an eagle surrounded in stars and the return address was The Department Of Defense. Spike found it particularly offensive and ironic that a letter such as this would begin with "Greetings."

It was actually very brief. Short and to the point. It instructed Xander that he was legally obligated to carry with him the card that had been enclosed and
whenever asked, should show it as proof of identity. There were some things Spike didn't understand.

"What does this mean? What is this number that they have assigned to you?"

Xander took the letter and stared at the number. It was very low. Just his luck. "It's my draft number. As soon as you turn eighteen you are eligible to be drafted into the military. The way they decide who to call first is done by a lottery. Each day, every guy that turns eighteen on that day has his name put into a drawing and the order your name is drawn is the order you will be taken."

Spike was dumbstruck. In theory, he had known that this was possible, but in his heart he preferred to think that by some miracle Xander would be overlooked and forgotten.

This made it real. This made it his worst nightmare.

"They can't. No! I won't let you go!"
Quickly, Xander wrapped his arms around the frightened, trembling boy. He rocked him and, in a strange reversal, found himself consoling and reassuring Spike rather than the other way around.

"It's all right. It will be OK. They can't touch me as long as I'm in high school and we still have another year to go. A year is a long time and my Dad says that, this time next year, there is no way we will still be fighting in Viet Nam. He says we will bomb them gooks and come home before Johnson has time to wipe his ass. I'm sure it will be over by then and when the war ends, so will the draft. Shit, you can't get rid of me that easy."

Spike buried his face in Xander's neck. He wished he had Xander's confidence.

Part Thirty-Eight
Spike sat on the small window seat in his living room. He had one foot tucked up under him and the curtain drawn back in his hand. He stared out into the darkness and twitched expectantly each time a car's headlights passed by the house. The morning sky had not yet begun to lighten and still carried that dusky grey color that promised to be shuffled aside by a brilliant blue. According to the weatherman, this was to be a stunningly perfect day in a state that thrives on perfect days.

Shuffling into the room, Rupert's thinning hair stood up on the top of his head and his glasses sat, perched at an odd angle on his nose. He yawned and idly stirred the cream into his first cup of morning tea. "William, I still don't understand why you need to go out so early. Surely the festivities will not commence until after all involved will have had a proper, nutritious breakfast."

Reluctantly, Spike turned his attention away from the window to face his father, who was following his habit of turning on the morning news. "But, Da, this is the Fourth of July! This is one of the biggest
holidays of the year! Independence Day. The day we tossed the tea into the drink and took a stand for freedom. The day we stomped our foot and told the scurrilous crown that we would not be bullied any longer!"

Rupert's cup of tea paused halfway to his lips before he calmly set it back down. "William, at the risk of pointing out the obvious, need I remind you that we are the villainous vipers that you are so vigorously vilifying?"

William stared at his father like the old man had suddenly grown a second head and horns. He took a moment to contemplate the tragedy of growing old and promised himself that he and Xander would never get buggy, no matter how old and decrepit they got. Even if they lived to the ancient age of forty or more! "Yeah, well, anyway, this is the day of the big surfing competition and Xander's got a good chance of winning. Besides, today is Xander's birthday so that has got to be lucky. That's why he's picking me up early, cause the gang is meeting to show our support for Xander."
Rupert smiled and sipped his cooling tea as he mumbled into his cup. "Well, there were certainly a lot of 'Xanders' in that statement."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing important. What is important, William is that you realize that although I am allowing you to go today, it is with the implicit understanding that you are to remain on dry land and not do anything to.... WILLIAM! You will stop rolling your eyes and pretending to hang yourself. Now, Jenny and I will be there around noon. She has promised a lovely basket of lunchmeat sandwiches and fruit so if you and your little friend.... William! Cease and desist with the mocking gun to your head! Oh, speaking of Jenny. Perhaps this would be a good time for you and I to have a talk about...."

"He's here! Xander just pulled up out front. I gotta go, Da. I'll see you there. Bye"
"William, I.... Damn."

The car horn honked three times at the curb, the front door slammed and his son was gone. Rupert sighed. He rose from his chair, wrinkled his nose at the cold tea and he headed toward the kitchen for a large bowl of fiber cereal. He had almost done it. He had nearly confessed to his only child that he was apparently betrothed. Knowing his son's dry sense of humor, he would no doubt have found it humorous, considering the pronouncement had come on Independence Day. Rupert found it somewhat less amusing.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike jumped into the car and as soon as the door shut and the interior light was extinguished, he leaned over and kissed the driver on the lips.

"Good morning! Happy holiday! Happy Birthday!"

Xander's smile threatened to split his face as he
held the boy in his arms. Spike's kisses were the best gift he had ever gotten, although his curiosity had him pondering the other 'special' surprise that Spike had promised. When he claimed a second kiss and started for a third, Spike swatted him away and he slid over to the passenger's side.

"Enough, you letch! Head for the cove. The others won't meet us there for at least an hour and I have a secret present hidden in the cave for you."

Xander tried not to giggle like a five-year-old anticipating a pony as he turned the key and stomped on the gas. He flew through town, taking advantage of the early morning lack of traffic to exceed the speed limit. He rolled through the stop sign that was the gang's favorite spot for a Chinese fire drill and he darted the wrong way up a one way alley. Through it all, Spike held on and hooted with delight.

When they finally reached the secluded cove, Xander parked, grabbed Spike's hand and physically jerked him from the car. Together they stumbled
through the heavy sand dunes until they reached the mouth of the cave. Panting from the exertion and excitement, Xander squinted against the darkness. "I don't see anything. Are you sure you left it in there? What is it?"

Spike placed his palms against Xander's back and pushed him to venture further into the cave. "It's there. Go on. You'll know it when you see it."

When they were a good fifty feet from the opening and mired in total darkness, Spike stopped. He ran his hands up under Xander's tee and across his bare chest, and gave him a push that caused the startled boy to step back until his shoulder blades hit the rock wall. It was cold and damp with moss and the entire cave smelled musty and wet. His excitement rose to a new level.

Xander's heart rate quickened as Spike's fingers brushed lightly over the tender, healing scratches on his chest. His fingernails briefly scraped across Xander's nipples and it sent a snap of electricity straight to his cock, causing it to respond with a
twitch. Xander still wasn't sure what Spike had in mind but he was fully on board.

"Are you sure you should be.... I mean you did almost.... Wait, let me pull off my shirt."

Xander tugged the tee over his head. In appreciation for his generous assistance, Spike thanked him with a trail of kisses that began between Xander's nipples, down his chest, and following the path of the line of dark tummy hair. When Xander sucked in his stomach, Spike stopped. By now, Xander's dick was hard as a rock and very impatient.

"Jesus, Spike, what are you gonna do? Are you gonna touch me?"

Spike straightened up, he placed a soft gentle kiss on Xander's lips, and as he gracefully sank to his knees he whispered, "I'm going to do more than touch you. I'm going to take your willy in my mouth and suck on you till you shoot your wad down my throat."
"Ohhh fuuuck!"

Xander smacked his head back against the cave and groaned. Was it possible that things like that were really done? The answer came quickly when Spike hooked his fingers on the waistband of Xander's swim shorts, and they dropped to Xander's knees as Spike hit his.

As the elastic caught and freed itself, Xander's cock bounced out, smacked Xander's tummy, then waited. Despite the lack of any usable illumination, Xander stared down where he knew Spike was centered. He dug his fingers into the soft blond hair and he tugged the face forward.

It was a terrible thing to ask Spike to do. Certainly it was taboo in decent society. It was the sort of thing you would expect from a two dollar whore on nickel night and Xander couldn't wait till he had the chance to do it too. He wondered what it would taste like. What it would smell like.
Suddenly a hot puff of breath against his nest of wiry curls sent his body reeling and his brain fizzled out. Every inch of his skin crawled and itched and when that hot, wet tongue finally made first contact, Xander whined his need into the darkness.

Spike too was overwhelmed when the sweet flavor of sweat and Xander exploded on his tongue. Hungrily, he shoved as much meat in his mouth as would fit. He used his right hand to free his own dick from its restrictive confines, and his left hand snaked around to feel Xander's arse. It was copping a quick feel to satisfy curiosity. He had dreamed of that arse and imagined it to be round, plump and firmly muscular. He was not disappointed and he hummed with pleasure. It was a vibration that quivered down Xander's shaft and pooled in his nuts.

It was an incredible sensation. Xander squatted and spread his knees as wide as possible in his shorts. His fingers splayed over his own chest and he jumped when he realized his nipples were almost too sensitive to be touched. He again grabbed a
fistful of Spike's hair and he rocked his hips back and forth. Spike was quick to take a hint. He released the golden arse with the promise of exploring it further next time and he gripped the root of the cock in his mouth.

And he sucked. He slurped and nibbled and hungrily tried to devour the delicious beef that filled and stretched his lips to capacity and quickly made his jaw ache. He sucked and sucked in a rhythm and pace that made Xander want to sing. Unfortunately the only song that popped into his brain was "Down in the Boondocks." Not entirely off base.

Then Spike nipped the bundle of nerves under the head.

Xander howled at the sensation that burned in his crotch, causing the waiting sperm in his nuts to bubble and boil. He cursed and whined and shouted profanities as his hips pumped his dick in and out of that hot, wet heaven. He tried to conjure up remorse when he heard Spike intermittently gag, but all he could acknowledge was the way the
added saliva felt as it washed over the swollen, sensitive head.

"Yeah baby, suck me. Fuck, your mouth feels so good. Suck me harder. Suck me...."

Suddenly, when Spike's tongue dipped into Xander's slit to lick out the salty pre-cum, Xander couldn't hold back any longer. In a feeling reminiscent of the time he stuck a penny in a light socket, Xander's body snapped and sang with a sharp sensation of pleasure/pain and his muscles went rigid.

His cock grew thicker and harder and Spike braced himself, blocking his throat with the back of his tongue.

"AAHHHH!!"

Xander's face scrunched up as he strained then, in a rapid series of physiological responses to the stimulation, his sac drew up, his butt cheeks clenched and his cock jerked and began to gush out wave after wave of hot, salty, bitter cum. It filled
Spike's cheeks and dribbled out the corners of his mouth. It seemed like gallons. When it finally slowed and stopped, Spike turned his head to the side and he spit.

Xander chuckled and went limp. He knew Spike was still unsatisfied but he was physically unable to do anything to help out. He slumped against the cave wall in satisfaction and enjoyed the grunts and sounds of wet skin slapping as Spike handled the crisis himself. When he heard Spike groan and when Xander felt a few warm drops splatter against his leg, his guilt was put to rest. After a pause of heavy breathing, Spike whispered.

"Happy Birthday."

Both boys burst out laughing.
Part Thirty-Nine

"What time is it?"

Spike looked at his boyfriend's back. Xander stood in the cove at the edge of the ocean and stared out at the rolling, crashing waves. It was a picture-perfect day in a state who logs perfect days on nearly every square of the calendar. He heard the concern in Xander's voice and didn't need to see the expression on his face to hear the worry in his words. His shoulders slumped and his back was more rigid than straight. And he had just asked the same question he had repeated every five minutes since the sun had crested over the horizon.

"I still don't know, Xan, but they will be here. No matter what, they are still your friends."

Although Spike's response was the same as it had been each time Xander asked, this time he acted as though he heard. This time he turned around and he walked back with a look of defeat and fear on his face that crushed Spike's heart.
"What if they aren't? Cordelia knows, and Riley seriously suspects. What if it's too much for them? What if they don't want a sissy for their friend? What if..."

"Hey, there you guys are. I know we're late but Buffy couldn't find the top to her pink 'kini. Cordy told her to just wear the orange one but she said she couldn't cause she didn't have an orange ponytail holder that would match. God forbid she shouldn't color coordinate."

Relief washed over him as Xander watched Willow, Buffy, Riley and even Cordelia pad over the sand humps to join him by the cave. He hadn't been ditched. He was still accepted. He hated to think it mattered, but it did. Spike grinned in the background. He had prayed that he hadn't been a wedge between the lifelong friends.

Riley threw his arm around Xander's shoulder. "Yeah, sorry buddy, but you know how impossible it is to hurry them up when they're talking shoes or
hair or even Kotex. I finally threatened to leave them if they didn't light a fire under their asses. So, are we ready to do this?"

"Ready to do it? Fuck, I'm ready to win it!"

Xander and Riley wandered off toward the shoreline to evaluate the waves, the wind velocity and any other variable that could affect their surfing. When they did, Willow and Buffy rushed Spike and began to question him as to his recovery and health. Cordelia held back. Her dark eyes shot daggers in his direction. She was nowhere near ready to make nice.

"We were really getting worried when you hadn't been around. We thought...."  

"Not all of us were worried. I know I wasn't. In fact, things were a lot better around here when you were gone so why don't you just fucking disappear again?"

Buffy and Willow shared a quick look between
them. For one brief nanosecond, they thought Cordelia's statement was a sarcastic attempt at humor. When they saw the expression of pure venom on her face, they knew there was no ha ha intended. Xander too had overheard the hateful statement and he turned, intending to stand by Spike's side, until Riley stopped him.

With a hand on Xander's arm, Riley shook his head. "Leave it, Xander. This was bound to happen and it's better if it happens here where we're alone rather than out on the main part of the beach. Truth is, Cordelia kinda owns the right to a confrontation and if Spike is any kind of man, he will stand up for what he wants without bragging about what he's got. If it gets too ugly, we can step in, but for now...."

Xander nodded. Riley was right and it would only make the situation worse if he were to go over and take his place beside Spike. It would be like ganging up and that was not the image he wanted to portray. Instead, they wandered over to the mountain of driftwood and debris that they had
stacked up over the last week for tonight's bonfire. As they pretended to evaluate its flaming potential, they both kept a close ear and eye on the verbal altercation.

Cordelia marched over till she was nearly nose to nose with her rival. Spike stood his ground. His face was blank and his chin jutted out defiantly. Buffy and Willow still had no idea what was happening and waited patiently for someone to say something that would clue them in. Cordelia did.

"You are an intrusive, man-stealing, sneaky bitch! Xander belongs to ME! He has always belonged to me and you think that you can just come along and take him? Fuck you! I don't know what you did to confuse him, but when he comes to his senses you will be out the door like yesterday's dirty kitty litter."

Willow's eyes bugged and her lower jaw hit the ground. Cordelia could not possibly be saying what she thought. Her accusations that Spike was...that Xander was...that together they were.... No. It just
wasn't feasible.

Buffy leaned over and whispered in Willow's ear. "What is Cordy so pissed off about? Where does she think Spike is taking Xan? Does Spike even have a driver's license?"

Willow rolled her eyes. She looked over at Xander and tried to gauge the level of truth in Cordy's words by his eyes and body language. What she saw rattled and disturbed her. He should have been proclaiming their innocence. He should have been laughing at her bizarre considerations. He was doing neither. Quickly, she turned back to the drama in the sand as Spike stepped up to bat.

"I didn't steal anything from you, Cordelia. You never owned him at all. You were just keeping him company until I came along to collect him. Thanks. You have been a peach, but now it's time to run along and find a new playmate."

Ouch. Spike's flip dismissal was like a slap in her face and Cordelia's hands formed fists at her sides.
She would not be spoken to that way. This situation was a humiliating whap to her ego that she would not allow. "You wish! Forget it, asshole! I'm not going anywhere! I'll be right here when he figures out that you are an embarrassment and a liar!"

Spike barked out an acid laugh. "I'M a liar? Are you fucking kidding me? I'm not the one that told Buffy and Willow that Xander and I were fucking like wild rabbits when the fact is that you and Xander have NEVER gone all the way. So, now who is embarrassed? Now who's the liar?"

Buffy blinked as she was finally brought up to speed, while Xander and Willow both flinched at the reaction they knew was coming. Riley grinned at Spike's chutzpah, and Buffy leaned toward Willow. "Does that mean that Cordy and Xan aren't doin' it?"

"Ssshhhhhh!!" Willow swatted Buffy away for fear that she may miss something.

Cordelia's response was swift and violent. She
screeched like a banshee and her hand flew up with the intent to scratch Spike's eyes out. Luckily, Spike was quicker. He grabbed her wrist and clamped his fingers painfully around it, jerking their faces even closer. The lightning bolts that shot from her eyes were matched by the fire that boiled from his. If she wanted a cat fight, he would let her know that he came here today wearing his best meow underwear.

At this point, everyone watching on the sidelines recognized that it was time to intervene. As long as the argument was verbal, it was airing things that probably needed to be said but when it got physical, it had to be stopped.

Willow and Buffy grabbed Cordelia and pulled her back as Xander jumped behind Spike and wrapped his arms around the smaller boy's chest, pinning his arms down and preventing him from swinging. Both combatants continued to shout, name call and kick up clouds of sand as they struggled to get at the other.
"Bitch!"

"Dick head!"

"Dickless!"

"Homo!"

"CUNT!"

"Takes one to smell one!"

"STOP IT! Both of you!"

When Xander, the object of their competition shouted, they both stilled. The tension level remained sky high, and just to be on the safe side, neither of them was released, but at least the cursing had ceased. By now, Willow fully understood the situation and the implication to their bonds as a group. With her hold on Cordelia secure, she took it upon herself to try and salvage what she could.
"Listen to me, both of you, we are a group. No matter what happens, we stand tight together. We always have and we always will and this is no different. We have covered for each other when we screwed up and we have supported each other when we failed. We have always been there for each other. I admit, none of us saw this coming, probably Xan included, but shit happens, Cordy. If you let us help you, we can get past this."

All the fire seemed to seep away and Cordelia looked to Willow with sad, imploring eyes that were already starting to rim with tears. "Shit happens? Shit happens? This was my whole world. If he hadn't come along, Xan and I would be getting married like I always planned."

Xander felt the fight go out of the body he held in his arms too and he cautiously released Spike, trusting that the moment of altercation had passed. Now the solution to the argument was the truth. With affection, Xander placed his hands on Spike's shoulders.
"That isn't true, Cordy. Marriage, to you, was a fantasy. It was a white wedding with all the fancy trimmings. It was acceptability and social standing, but it wasn't about you and me being a family. I should have spoken up a long time ago. It was cowardly of me to let you go on thinking we had a future together. Everybody has that one special person that they are supposed to spend a lifetime with. You will find that person because you are a great girl and a guy would be lucky to have you. It just isn't me."

Cordelia sniffled and squared her shoulders as she tried to regain a small morsel of dignity. She knew what he was saying was the truth, but it didn't diminish the pain or make the situation less perplexing.

"But he's a guy. You want to do things with him that I wanted you to do with me?"

The others cringed in embarrassment and eagerly awaited his answer. Spike, too, wondered how Xander would respond. They didn't have long to
wait. Xander spun Spike around in his arms and kissed him fully and deeply on the mouth as the others gasped. Finally, when it appeared they all may see a lot more than they were ready for, Riley spoke up. "Well, nice as that is, we have a fucking surfing competition to sign up for. Come on, let's go do this."

Riley stood sideways and straightened his arm. Willow stood next to him and placed her hand on top of his. Buffy did the same and Xander followed suit. With Xander's smiling encouragement, Spike joined them and the group then looked to Cordelia, who held back. Riley nodded his head at her. "Come on, Cordy. We are solid. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. You are an important link and we need you."

Reluctantly, Cordelia eased over and finally placed her hand in the circle. When they were all joined, Riley repeated the words they had said together a hundred times over the years.

"Whatever happens in our group, stays in our
group. We protect our own. One for all, all for one. Are we strong?"

The others felt the weight and the heat that came from all their hands pressed together and it gave them heart. As one voice, they leaned their heads together and they chanted. "We are strong. We are solid. LET'S GO!"

They broke contact and, with a laugh, proved that despite all misunderstandings and hurt feelings, they were still an impenetrable circle.

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**Part Forty**


The day was stunningly beautiful. The sky was impossibly blue and the warm sun sparkled and snapped off the grains of white sand, glinting like a
vast field of diamonds. In honor of the nation's birthday, the ocean's waves were perfectly measured. High, wild and eager to serve at the whims of the humans who came to play. Every element of nature worked together to assure the holiday would be perfect and to affirm the sure knowledge that, at this time and place in history, the United States of America was God's favored child.

The coastline they had all flocked to was long. It spanned nearly a mile of flat, smooth seascape and today it was jammed with wall-to-wall revelers setting up picnic baskets, coolers with hidden beer bottles, and children dragging mesh bags of sand toys. There were chubby fathers and beleaguered mothers. There were girls in very scanty suits and teenaged boys appreciating them.

And they all waved flags. Hundreds of small, patriotic, red, white and blue rectangles of fabric that represented a way of life that they shared and celebrated like one big happy family.
Into this atmosphere, the six members of the tightly knit group of friends trooped across the hot, dry sand, marching from the cove of seclusion and misunderstanding to the beach of unity and civilization. Inwardly the six still had issues and animosities, but the face they presented to the world was one of mutual support and congeniality. With Xander and Riley in the lead and the four others directly behind, they rounded the bend and entered the area of the coastline open to the public.

Spike was taken aback at the sudden explosion of activity. He could never have imagined so many people could congregate in one place. Even in a city as hugely populated as London, he had no experience with which to compare this. The idea of Britain celebrating a mass birthday was simply ludicrous yet here, in the States, it was the most natural thing in the world.

When he looked to the others, he could see that this was just what they had expected and they were not necessarily impressed. At the edge of the
entrance, they all stopped and circled up to fine-
tune their strategy.

Using his hand to shade his eyes, Xander pointed off
toward a brightly colored cabana with a long line of
tanned, athletic young men snaking off to the side
like a curled tail. It was set aside from the areas
where the families were playing, and it was a
businesslike activity that was in contrast to the
relaxed, freewheeling movement of children who
had no interest in a surfing contest.

Riley squinted and, even at this distance, it was
obvious that only a few of the competitors were
local boys while the rest were pros. Xander and he
shared a glance and a nod of mutual understanding.
The locals were of no significance. There was no
one in Sunnydale who could touch Xander Harris or
Riley Finn in skill on the boards.

The professional surfers were another matter.
These were men who surfed for a living. They had
sponsors and traveled the coastlines of the world
shooting the curls, riding the waves and solidifying
their reputations as the best. They were athletes. Pumped, muscular and experienced. They were not here for the paltry $500 prize money. They were here for the fame and the business opportunities assured through the Brown Bodies tanning oil company that sponsored this competition. These were the ones that had Xander and Riley concerned.

Masking his trepidation under an expression of nonchalance, Xander turned to the others with an air of business-like efficiency. "That's the sign-in booth and Riley and I need to go get a number. Why don't you all find a spot and spread out a couple blankets. Make it as close to the shore as possible so after each of our rides, we can rest up and still keep an eye on the competition."

The girls nodded and began scanning the landscape. They were more than willing to boot anyone who was in the way and use as much muscle as necessary to secure the best sandy vantage point. After all, this was their beach and the tourists could take what was left. It was simply a matter of
Squatter's rights.

Spike held back, hesitant and uncertain. He wanted to go with Xander but knew that, for now, that was Riley's place. His feet shuffled in sandy indecision as he watched while the back of his boyfriend blended and melded into the crowd of milling people, and he unconsciously took a step forward to follow before Willow interlaced her fingers with his and tugged.

"Come on. We have a spot over there. Xan will be back when they're done. Listen, sweetie, I just want you to know that no matter what, you're still one of us and don't worry about Cordy. She'll come around. Right now, her ego is bruised and her feelings are hurt but we all know that Xander has never seemed happier. You two are perfect together. Um, speaking of together, I'd never ask what it is you two do but if you ever want to talk about it, you know, details and specifics, I'd be willing, friend to friend, to listen."

During the impassioned speech, Spike's head had
slowly swiveled from the disappearing boyfriend and landed on the way-too-eager girl buddy. Although his expression remained blank, his eyebrows rose sharply in reaction to the sparkle in her eyes and the squeeze of her hand on his as her excitement level bubbled up at the offer.

"Oh, well...," he deadpanned, "that is wonderful. If I ever need to confide or if we ever get anything stuck and are unable to dislodge it, I will certainly call on you."

Willow staggered back as the images bombarded her brain. Luckily, Spike had a firm grip on her hand and with an evil grin he led her away before she could tumble onto the sand. About twenty yards away, he could see the large area the girls had laid claim to and he dragged her off in that direction.

They had two old, worn flannel blankets spread out side by side and held down against the constant ocean wind by their straw baskets and oversized purses of necessary junk. Cordelia and Buffy sat cross-legged and Willow dropped down the same
way. Spike glanced over at Cordy and was much relieved when she stuck her tongue out at him. It was a gesture that said she was still mad and hurt but that they would all get past this. Eventually. Someday.

For the next forty-five minutes they chatted and people-watched, offering their critique of whoever passed by. They scowled menacingly at small children with melting ice cream that wandered too close to their oasis, and they smiled sweetly at the influx of muscle men who had arrived for the pussy and the surf. They compared notes on how much body hair they liked on their men and they all poked a finger in their throats to gag at the mention of fuzzy forests of back hair.

"Hey, Spike. How they hangin'?"

Four heads snapped around and looked up into the glare of the sun. Spike's face broke into a big grin as he realized who it was. "Hey, Penn. Hey, Larry. They are hanging very well thank you. You guys signing up for the competition?"
The two boys stood very close to each other and Larry picked constantly at the leg hem of Penn's trunks. Every once in a while, his finger would brush against Penn's thigh as a dreamy expression floated over his eyes. "Nah. We ain't good enough to play with the big boys. We just came to watch. Sometimes it's fun just to watch. Right, Lar?"

Larry nodded his big melon head and giggled like a fool. He was still nodding and giggling as Penn waved good-bye and lead him away. When they were gone, Buffy huffed and folded her arms across her chest. "Oh, so now we're chummy with Franklyn jerks?"

Spike gave her a stern look as he reprimanded her for what he viewed as an inappropriately hoity-toity attitude. "That's right. We are. Penn and Larry are very nice, and for that matter, so are most of the other kids at Franklyn, and I think this rivalry has gone on long enough. We should all try to be friends. In fact, I'll bet you can't name one thing about them that you don't like, can you?"
Buffy's hand flew up like a first grader asking for a bathroom pass. "Ooo. Ooo. I can. I heard that all the football players have back hair thicker than Yogi Bear."

Instantly, the other three wrinkled their noses and let out a combined, "EEWWW!" Within minutes, all four friends were rolling and laughing together on the blankets as they imagined a team of bears charging against their smooth-skinned teens. Only Spike was aware of the term 'twink' but he decided that this was not the time to enlighten them.

"Hey, what's so funny?"

Together, they looked up as Riley and Xander returned. The boys had matching tags stuck on the sides of their swim trunks with their number emblazoned in large bold letters. #23. They were breathless with excitement as they laid their boards down and flopped into the cluster of friends.

"Oh, wow! Jack Addy is here! So is Michael Bolt and
Rocky Coons! Jesus fucking Christ. They are the best surfers in the fucking world. Right here in Sunnydale! Shit, we might as well strip off our trunks and run around naked as get in the surf with them."

Spike waggled his eyebrows at the suggestion and Cordy rolled her eyes in disgust. Xander never would have said something like that when they were together. Not that she wouldn't have liked for him to. Riley, on the other hand was all business. He too had been temporarily swayed by the impressive lineup but he was nowhere near ready to toss in the beach towel. "Fuck them. You know surfing, Xan. It isn't always about the surfer. A lot of it is the luck and cooperation of the waves. When you get out there and pick one, you hope it's right. You count on the wave to swell and curl, and pray that it doesn't just peter out and wash you off. Truth is, there is no way to tell for sure. They may be more experienced than us, but we know Sunnydale waves and that is a plus for our side."

Before anything else could be discussed, the
loudspeaker boomed across the beach and silence fell over the crowd.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WELCOME TO THE BROWN BODIES SURFING COMPETITION OF 1965. BEFORE WE BEGIN, WILL EVERYONE PLEASE STAND FOR THE SINGING OF THE NATIONAL ANTHEM."

Immediately, everyone on the beach leapt to their feet and all hands slapped over their hearts as a thousand voices broke out in song.

"Ohh say can you see...."

Part Forty-One

Xander and Riley sat hunched over on the corner of the sandy blanket. They had their heads together and they studied the 'Rules' sheets they had been given at sign-in. They ignored the loudspeaker that continued to blare across the beach as the different speakers welcomed the crowd, hawked the sponsor's products, and even the local politicians got in a boring word or two.
"Holy fuck, Xan, I had no idea there was so much technical shit involved! I thought we would just go out there and surf. This says we are judged on technique, maneuvers, and, oh, hell, read this where it says, 'Judges expect to see changes of direction of the boat on the wave. Such maneuvers would include bottom turns, re-entries, cutbacks, floaters, aerials, tube rides, top turns, lake take offs, trimming and stalling. How radical they are, followed by the amount of control and commitment put into each one will determine how high they will score.' I mean seriously, Xan, what the fuck? Have you ever even heard of these terms?"

Xander scratched his head. He had to admit he had only heard of one or two of those words, and most of the surfing lingo he picked up was from bad beach movies that Cordy dragged him to. Maybe they were in over their heads. Maybe it was time to walk away.

Spike sat quietly. He had been plastered to Xander's side ever since the two boys had returned and he
could almost feel the vibration of insecurity and doubt as it shuddered through Xander's body, transferring to Spike's thigh where they touched. He knew if those seeds of doubt were allowed to grow, the contest would be lost before it even began. "Bullshit! Look at you two acting like a couple little cheerleaders afraid to do a cartwheel. So these are some new words. So what? Read them again, yeah? It doesn't take a genius to figure out what they mean. You two can do every one of them and do them well. Are you going to pussy out without even trying? Is that how it is Xander? Am I dating a pussy? Cause I think we both know that is not my cup of tea."

Xander and Riley looked at each other in surprise then had to laugh. Spike was right. They had almost let their fear intimidate them from trying. They wouldn't have done that in a big football game and they were certainly not ready to concede defeat now. With only minutes left before the first big elimination, the three of them put their heads together and quickly began to strategize.
"OK, the first round is the elimination. It's everyone out at once. All twenty-eight teams. That's when the judges will cut the field to ten teams, so you just know that these hot dogs are going to be out for blood. They will try to slap board and drive us under in order to seal a spot in the rest of the trials. It says in the rules that they take points off for cutting out another surfer or causing an endangerment. I say we keep our boards clean and shoot neat and tight. Let the others fight for their spots and we will slip in under the wave."

Xander and Spike nodded as Riley spelled out their initial game plan. Meanwhile all the other teams did the same.

~*~*~*~*~


Willow pounded her fist against the thin metal door of the toilet stall and shouted, "Damn, Cordy. Did you fall in? What the fudge is taking you so long?"
The competition is about to start and we'll miss the first run."

"Do you mind? Sheesh! A girl has personal business ya know."

Buffy and Willow stood outside the outhouse and they wrinkled their noses at the overpowering stench of Cordelia's 'personal business.' When Buffy tipped her head in the direction of fresh air and sunshine, Willow nodded her agreement before calling back, "Cool. No sweat, but me and the Buff are going to wait outside. If they blow the starting horn, we are shooting for the shoreline. Meet'cha there. 'K?"

Cordelia's response was prefixed by a loud, rumbling burst of foul air which caused the other two to leap back, slap a hand over their noses and back quickly out of the small, confined space. It was all the answer they needed. Lunging out, their lungs strained as they held their breath till they were several feet away, at which time they gasped in huge gulps of fresh, untainted oxygen.
"Holy crap! What the hell does she eat?"

Willow burst out laughing at Buffy's incredulous question. When she was able to regain some semblance of composure, she grabbed Buffy's hand and began tugging her away. This was actually the perfect opportunity to talk to Buffy without Cordelia's supersonic hearing nearby.

"Smelled like a chipmunk crawled up there and died. So, Buff, this really lets you off the hook, huh?"

Buffy shrugged and looked everywhere but at her friend as she pretended to have no clue. "Hook about what? No comprendo, Wil."

Willow rolled her eyes and heaved a great sigh of exasperation. Fine, if that was the way Buffy wanted to play it, Willow knew her lines. "You want me to spell it out? Cool. Cordy was fibber-catting. Her and the big Xan-man never went all the way and now he has the tweeks for blondie. So, no
competition. Her cherry is still firmly planted just like yours and you don't need to keep your date with that creepy Angel."

Buffy folded her arms over her chest and let out a defiant huff. This time she stared directly into Willow's cool green eyes and left no doubt of her conviction. "See, that's your problem, Wil. You just can't see the big picture. You still think this is like in grade school when I brought peanut butter and Cordy brought ham. I'm through waiting to see what's in her sammich only to be one-upped. This is about me sneering at her stupid sliced ham and slapping her in the face with a roast beef on rye. This is me being first for once. Don't you get it? It's even better knowing that her and Xan didn't hide the baloney. I'll be it. I'll be the first one in our class to be a real woman. Cordy can get laid a million times after that. Hell, she can go down on the docks and meet the fleet when their ship comes in, but I will always have been first. So, HA! HA, I say!"

Willow frowned as she watched Buffy accentuate the last statement with her finger punching the air.
Too bad Buffy hadn't been this determined when it came to her math finals. Still, there was something else that bothered her very much. "Yeah? So if you are all that hell-bent to kick your feet in the air, what about Riley? I think he really loves you. If you do this, it will break his heart. If you are so hot to trot, why can't you peel panties for Riley?"

Buffy dropped her head and seemed fascinated with her toes as they dug and scooped in the warm grains of sand. Her voice was quieter and less convinced. "Truth is, I don't know how I feel about him. If I let Riley 'drop into the Y,' he'll get the wrong idea. 'Sides, Angel is experienced. He knows what to do and how to make it really great. It will be just like that beach scene in that old movie "From Here to Eternity." On the other hand, Riley doesn't know diddly-squat. A first time with him would be more like The Three Stooges minus a stooge. I guess we would be Larry and Moe 'cause Curly is way too fat. Of course if you count Shemp...."

"Buffy! Keep the focus! We are talking about S. E. X. I still think you are making the biggest mistake...."
"Whew! There you guys are. Hey, free life lesson. Never mix apple juice with a big honking helping of pinto beans. They will do ugly things to yer innerds. So, what is the biggest mistake of Buffy's life this week?"

Buffy and Willow blinked and stared at each other as they tried to think of some innocent answer to throw Cordelia off. Luckily before either could trip over their tongues, a loud horn blasted through the air and signaled a great rush of both surfers and spectators to the coastline. The surfing competition had begun.

Willow squealed and jumped up and down.

"Come on! This is it!"

Xander leapt to his feet. He was psyched. His eyes sparkled and glowed with excitement as he held out his hand. Spike slapped his on top and Riley joined in. Together, they counted to three, let out a war whoop and grabbed their boards. The sudden rush
of adrenaline flushed the insecurities from their bodies and they ran for the waves.

The girls rushed toward the coastline, arriving at Spike's side just in time to see Riley and Xander toss their boards into the Pacific Ocean and smoothly leap on top. They watched their friends paddle powerfully out, cutting cleanly through the huge waves that rolled toward the shore, washing and crashing over them. Despite knowing their voices could never be heard over the roar of the sea, Buffy, Cordelia and Spike shouted their encouragement, just as the other spectators did the same for their favorites.

Anxiety and excitement quivered along the beach as the forty-eight men who comprised the twenty-four teams grew smaller as the distance stretched. Finally, when it seemed as though they would never stop, the first team paused and turned on their boards.

The crowd fell silent.
Within moments most of the others, team #23 included, also reached the same area. Toward the center of the pack, team #17 collided their boards together sending each other into the drink. The judges took note. Xander and Riley were too focused on their own ride to care. Their hearts pounded as a wave lifted them, but by mutual understanding, they let it pass. Team #4 made the mistake of choosing it and their ride ended seconds after it began as the swell fell and dissolved.

Finally, they felt it. Their timing had been impeccable. All the teams still waiting knew that this was the one. With the roar and the force of a freight train it drove up behind them and sent them pushing and paddling to join it. Their arms worked like ship's oars as they drove on. They crouched, balanced, and at the exact perfect moment, they leapt to their feet as the God Poseidon shoved them up and away from his kingdom.

The ride was on!

The elevated judges' stand was all business as they
stood, staring through their binoculars, and called numbers and comments to their assistants behind them who frantically and accurately jotted down everything for tabulation later.

On this first ride, there was little room for manipulation and maneuvers so Xander and Riley went with tight, clean rides. They had decided to focus first on speed and control, hoping to make the big cut. Once they were assured a spot in the top ten, they could go for a bit of showmanship on the later rides.

As the first of the riders sailed in to shore, their supporters rushed to meet them. When team #23 arrived, it was to praise and shouts of support not only from the Sunnydale bunch but also from several strangers standing nearby. Grabbing their boards and panting to catch their breath, the boys waded through the well-wishers and back-slappers to drop onto the blankets and wait for the judges' decisions.
Part Forty-Two

Spike paced back and forth in front of their blankets and he ranted continuously. "What the fig are those blasted judges doing up there in that booth? I can't say firsthand but I'm pretty sure if they were butt fucking each other they could be done and hosed off by now."

Xander snorted and tried to sound stern through his chuckles. "Shhh!! Geez Louise, Spike. There are little kids running around here. They'll make the announcement when they're ready."

Ever since the first round had ended, Spike had entertained the group with an almost nonstop litany of profanity-laced comments that questioned the judges' heritage, penis size, animal preference and drugs of choice. His gross, descriptive terms
and sarcastic humor had them all in stitches. Even Cordelia had to crack a smile and admit, at least to herself, that Spike was extremely cool and fun as hell.

As well as being a sexually informative comic, Spike's floor show had gone a long way toward helping to pass the time, as the judges appeared to be in no hurry to announce the very important list of the ten teams that would compete in the day's competition. They all knew, though no one would say the words, that if Xander and Riley didn't make the cut, the day was done.

"Oh, come on now! Even if they're horny as fuck, can't one of them make the announcement while the other sucks him off under the table? Cripes, I'm not asking him to swallow...."

Suddenly, Spike's rambling was cut off as the loud, ear-piercing squeal of the loudspeaker feedback signaled they were about to speak. Silence blanketed the beach as surfers and spectators alike rose to their feet and waited anxiously for the yea
"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THE FOLLOWING TEAMS HAVE MADE THE INITIAL CUT. THESE ARE THE SURFERS WHO WILL BE COMPETING DURING THE REST OF THE DAY. THE NUMBERS ARE IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER AND DO NOT, AT THIS TIME, REFLECT YOUR STANDING."

The Sunnydale group stood together. They all held hands and no one commented that Spike interlaced his fingers with Xander's as they stared off in the direction of the small, elevated viewing booth. They held their breath. No one blinked. The only sound came from Willow who quietly whispered, "Come on...come on...."

"TEAMS #12. #3. #16. #20. #21. #14. #18. #23. #6. #8. IF YOUR TEAM NUMBER WAS NOT CALLED, WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION. IF YOUR TEAM NUMBER WAS CALLED, WE ASK THAT YOU REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO THE JUDGES' BOOTH FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS."
Together, they all turned and looked at each other in shock as they tried to convince themselves that they had heard correctly. Finally, Riley let out a 'Woo hoo!' and threw his arms around his partner. It was a move that broke the spell and sent them all into a frenzy of spasmodic jerks, jumps, wiggles and laughter. They had made it!

"Stop! Stop! Go! Go! You guys have to report to the judges' booth. Hurry up."

Spike shoved Xander, getting his attention and bringing Team Sunnydale back to earth. Xander and Riley stumbled over their own feet, each others' feet and after a fast argument over whether or not to take their boards along, they were off, rushing toward the magical blue wooden shack. Spike waved and called after them, "Don't let them pull down your trunks!" Buffy hooted and slapped him on the arm.

Eight surfers reported and eagerly awaited the judges' instructions. After a few more minutes, the last two sauntered up, a casual attitude that clearly
irked. The booth was stark. No thrills, no frills. It was three chairs for three judges. Directly behind them was a long table with papers and pencils strewn out as though they had been tossed there haphazardly. Sitting silently behind the table were three young, handsome boys who were at the whim of the judges, making Xander wonder if there wasn't a grain of truth in some of Spike's sarcastic quips.

The man in the center of the front row was clearly in charge. Despite his age, which hovered somewhere in the mid-fifties, he was tall, tan, and fit. He was also very annoyed. He stood in the open doorway of the shack with his arms crossed over his chest and he looked down on his surfers. "Before we start, gentlemen, I'm going to warn you up front that if any of you are late when you are called for your turn in the water, your team will be instantly disqualified. We will make two announcements. The first will designate your turn up. At that time you will report to the shoreline. We will then call the start of the run and if you are not in the water within one minute, we will call your disqualification."
Do you all understand?"

Every head bobbed in total sincerity and a sliver of fear. Xander noticed that the twosome that had kept them waiting was a team headed by the pro surfer, Rocky Coons. Xander wasn't sure if it was a trick of the sun glare or if Rocky had actually rolled his eyes at the warning.

For the next five minutes, they stood attentively as the judge who introduced himself as George Smith, a past winner of the competition, gave them a fast recap of the rules and the calculation of points. They spelled out what they would and would not allow and they wished all the participants luck. They were dismissed.

Xander and Riley talked nonstop as they returned to the nest to await their turn. This was what they had hoped and prayed for. This was what they never believed would really happen. They didn't notice the admiring eyes of the surfing fans as they passed by. They were oblivious to the giggling, bikini-clad women who sucked in their tummies and poked out
their boobs as the boys moved on.

The girls jumped to their feet when their team returned. Everyone was too edgy to sit and they all talked at once. The boys explained that during this round, they would be called two teams at a time to compete, and the field would be whittled down to five final teams. Those teams would take center stage, one at a time, alone. Although they were certain they could not go that far, Xander and Riley began to excitedly discuss what they could do to make a lasting impression on George and his compadres. Within moments, the first call came up.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. PLEASE TURN YOUR ATTENTION TO THE COASTLINE AS TEAMS #12 AND #3 REPORT FOR THE FIRST RIDE OF ROUND TWO. TEAMS #12 AND #3."

The Sunnydalers rushed toward the shore to watch. The girls' carefully selected spot on the beach proved woefully lacking and too distant for a viewing this important. Xander stepped forward, letting the ocean splash and break against his ankles.
as he squinted into the sun. He watched the four men extend their boards, leap on and begin driving out into the ocean. His heart pounded as they executed smooth, skillful rides and he didn't breathe until their boards beached on the sand.

He and Riley compared notes. They paced. They worried and they spouted false confidences. It was a routine that repeated as each new set of surfers were called to the line. It was agonizing. It was nerve wracking. It was torture.

It was nearly an hour before the moment arrived and when it did, Xander feared he might throw up.

"Oh fuck. Oh fuck. Oh fuck. Oh fuck."

The chant was stopped and Xander was snapped from his stupor by a sound smack to the back of his head. "Damn it, Xander. Get your fucking board and get to the water. I don't care if you lose today but if you get disqualified because you were late, I will kick your fucking arse!"
The dazed look in Xander's eyes cleared and snapped to alertness. Without thinking, he kissed Spike quickly on the lips and grabbed his board as he and Riley ran for their chosen spot. Bystanders laughed and chalked up the spontaneous peck to youthful excitement.

They held their boards to their sides. Their muscles strained as every inch of their bodies quivered in anticipation. Riley looked to Xander and gave a nod that said he understood that Xander was the lead of team #23 and Riley would unquestioningly follow.

"LAUNCH!"

A massive roar rose up from the crowd as the four surfers flung themselves into the wild, rolling waves of the Pacific Ocean. Their strong arms dipped repeatedly into the water, driving them further and further from the shore. Xander's focus was on the ride and Riley's focus was on Xander. They had both, by mutual agreement, decided not to concern themselves with what their competitors were doing and would, instead, make this ride about them
doing their best.

It wasn't until they stopped and turned that they realized they had extended much further out than the other team. As they stabilized their boards on the water, they sat up and took a moment to give their strained biceps time to relax, preventing possible cramping.

The waves came and went but were deemed too small to ride. As the time stretched, Riley finally felt the ocean rise and lift them. With a grin he turned to the side and was confused when Xander made a slashing motion across his throat, signaling not to go. Together they watched as the other team hopped on it and began their ride. Riley prayed Xander hadn't screwed up.

Less than two minutes later, it began. It was more than a wave, it was a watery monster that put a look of glee on Xander's face and a nod to his head. The boys began to paddle. They steered with the direction of the wave as they felt their speed pick up and shove them forward. When Riley glanced
back, he saw it. It was incredible. It was a wall of water and foam that temporarily sent a shiver of fear through him before he let his trained athlete out. He shut off his brain and he did what he knew best.

It was the perfect wave. It was a surfer's wave that filled the horizon with a gigantic curl that formed a massive tunnel of thrilling opportunity. And it was an opportunity that was not wasted.

Xander and Riley owned the wave. They saddled it up, threw a bridle over it and rode it like a bucking bronco at the rodeo. They skillfully held their boards in a line that shot right down the center of the curl as the water sprayed over them, onto their faces and even up their noses.

They laughed at the ocean's attempt to dislodge them, and their arms and feet moved continuously as their boards sailed on. The ocean roared its protest, blocking out the sound of the mob of spectators on shore that whooped and hollered and cheered them on.
Finally, it collapsed. The curl conceded defeat and it fell back into the splash of water that pushed the riders of team #23 up onto the beach, where they hopped off their boards and into the crush of on-lookers that was every bit as overwhelming as the wave they had just beaten.

Part Forty-Three

This time the wait was nearly relaxed. Xander briskly ruffled the towel through his long, dark hair as he and Riley compared notes on the ride they had just shared. No one in the group would jinx it by verbalizing what they all thought. That the ride was perfect. That it would ensure them a spot in the final five. That they were still in the running.

Xander laughed as he briskly swiped the towel down his legs and finally looped it around his neck
to wait. The others bubbled with praise and he was still catching his breath when they heard the loudspeaker squeal.

"ATTENTION PLEASE. THE SCORES HAVE BEEN TABULATED AND THE FIVE TEAMS ADVANCING TO THE SEMI-FINALS HAVE BEEN DETERMINED. BEFORE WE REVEAL THE NAMES AND NUMBERS OF THE FINALISTS, WE WOULD LIKE TO COMMEND ALL OUR PARTICIPANTS AND IF YOUR NUMBER IS NOT CALLED, WE INVITE YOU TO COME TO THE JUDGES' STAND FOR A COMPLIMENTARY T-SHIRT."

Spike snorted in disgust. "I'll tell you what they can do with their fucking t-shirts. They can wrap them around their peckers like cotton raincoats and...."

Cordelia shot Pepsi out her nose in laughter before smacking Spike on the shoulder as the booming announcement continued.

"WHILE ALL OF YOU EXHIBITED EXEMPLARY SURFING SKILLS, ONLY FIVE TEAMS CAN MOVE ON. THE FIVE SEMI-FINALISTS ARE: TEAM #3. TIP
WARNER AND BILL HO. TEAM #16. CAM CARTER AND JAY WALKER. TEAM #21. BOBBY SCOTT AND TERRY GUILDER. TEAM #23. XANDER HARRIS AND RILEY FINN. AND FINALLY, TEAM #6. ROCKEY COONS AND FRITZ GAREN. CONGRATULATIONS GENTLEMEN AND PREPARE FOR YOUR SOLO RIDES."

Xander was speechless. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back to bathe his face in the rays of the sun as he basked in the warmth and glow of the moment. Even though expected, hearing their names like that was almost like they had been called by the voice of God himself. It didn't matter if they went no further, this day was one he would remember forever.

When he opened his eyes and turned his head, he saw the matching expression on Riley's face and a look of awe and appreciation on his friends'. They all understood. Then the stark reality of their situation hit home and the six dropped to the blanket. There was a one-hour break while Brown Bodies sold shirts, tanning oil and miscellaneous crap. It was time that Xander and Riley would get
themselves prepped both mentally and physically.

Willow shook Xander's arm. She was a nervous wreck. She couldn't have been more geeked up if she were riding the waves herself. "FOOD! Are you guys hungry? Should I go get hot dogs or burgers or nacho chips or something? Oh, how about a Coke? I know you must be thirsty. You name it. Whatever you want, I'll go get."

Xander paid no attention to her as he and Riley continued with their heads together. Instead, Spike took his boyfriend's well-being into his own hands and acted as Xander's agent. He shook his head firmly. "No. No food. Do you want him to get a cramp out there and go under? And no soda. Nothing carbonated. It will make bubbles in his stomach and bowels and throw off his balance when he needs to fart. No, no I will go with you to the concession stand and I will supervise what he can have."

No one questioned Spike's authority as the three girls jumped up and obediently followed the short
blond boy who marched across the sand with a Lawrence of Arabian air. They snaked in and around the blankets and beach towels that covered nearly every open spot of sand, and they swerved as several wild and apparently unsupervised children ran by.

"William! William! Over here!!"

Spike's step faltered while his eyes sought the source of his paging. With a cringe of embarrassment, he spotted his father's pasty pale chest as the older man stood on his tiptoes and waved wildly to catch Spike's attention.

Damn. He had been spotted. Eye contact had been established. Escape was impossible.

With reluctance and trepidation, he admitted defeat and changed directions with the girls following faithfully behind. As they moved closer, Rupert bounced happily on the balls of his feet, a move which caused his flabby man-boobs to wiggle grotesquely. Spike was certain it was done to
humiliate him.

"William, what luck. We have only just arrived."

Spike looked around his father to where Jenny laid, propped up on her elbows in a very skimpy and brightly colored bikini. She appeared oblivious to Rupert's pasty white skin and lack of manly physique. She smiled brightly and waved, "Hi Will."

Spike marginally lifted his hand as his father continued. "I would never have imagined so many people would be here. This is astounding. Jenny said we would never find you in such a huge mob but, well, here you are. And who are your little friends? Introductions, William."

Spike had recently read that the coastline of Southern California is subject to horrendous and potentially disastrous events. Something called the San Andreas Fault line. It was said that at some time in the near future, it would cause the entire coastline of California to snap off and drop into the ocean, never to be seen again. Spike wondered
where the fucking thing was when you needed it most. "Oh, sure, sorry, this is Willow Rosenberg, Cordelia Chase, and Buffy Summers. Guys, this is my father and his, um, friend Jenny Calendar."

Buffy popped her head around and grinned. "Hey, hi! So you're Spike's dad. Did Spike tell you that my mom wanted you to call her? She said that whenever you are free, she would love to have you over for dinner."

That was when Spike first realized rescue and redemption could come in the most unexpected forms. Just when you think there is no hope, hope arrives. And sometimes it arrives on the wings of a polka dot bikini and a blond pony tail, that continually flipped happily like a puppy on dog biscuits.

"She said to let her know whenever you're free and she'll cook you up a scrumptious roast. Do you have her number?"

Instantly, Jenny sat bolt upright as poor Rupert
continued to look clueless. He was still sussing out the particulars of the unexpected statement when he heard Jenny behind him. "Oh, don't worry one little bit, Buffy. I have your mother's number."

The distinct tinge of venom in Jenny's voice struck them all. Spike lit up as he caught the first scent of an escape tunnel and Buffy grinned happily, assured that Miss Calender would be giving Rupert the number any minute now. Rupert froze. He eased the glasses off his nose and began polishing the lenses with the corner of the towel that hung around his neck. When they were spotless, he replaced them and slowly turned around. What he saw on her face sent chills down his spine and immediately, like a mother hen, Spike gathered his flock and herded them away as the high-pitched, "Why the hell does Joyce Summers want you to call her? Have you been talking to her? What the fuck have you been doing, Rupert? Are you playing me like Sally Simpleton?" licked at his heels.

Who the hell needs an earthquake when you have Buffy Summers on your side?
Xander and Riley had run out of words. They had gone over and over each and every move of their previous rides and all possible twists and turns of the rides yet to come. They were the readiest of ready and teetered on the brink of being over-ready. A condition both of recognized as potentially dangerous.

"I gotta pee. You want to come?"

Riley snorted at his friend's question. "Nah, when that fucking wave curled up over us, I ain't ashamed to admit, I pissed myself right there and then, but, hey, I finished the ride."

Xander barked out a laugh and slapped Riley on the back as he walked away. The relatively short trip to the outhouses took longer than imagined. As quarterback of the football team and center of the basketball team, Xander was no stranger to a certain amount of praise and admiration, but this was accolades to the max.
Every few steps he took toward the bathrooms, he was stopped, praised and touched. He was patted on the back, his hand was shaken and he was kissed on the cheek. Everyone, it seemed, was pulling for the hometown team. Just as he was beginning to worry that he was about to follow Riley's example and pee-dampen his trunks, he made it to the stall.

With a sigh of relief he stepped inside and was immediately snatched into a bear hug.

"Well, well, well. What the fuck have we got here? The very fucking pip-squeak that thinks he can beat the pants off me. How about we have a talk? What do you say, Pip-Squeak?"

Xander flinched. The smell of alcohol on the man's breath was overwhelming and nauseating.

"Mr. Coons?"
Part Forty-Four

Ever since the age of thirteen, Xander Harris had been enamored of Rocky Coons. He had posters of the man hanging on his bedroom walls. They were huge, colorful, glossy pictures of his hero riding majestically, skimming effortlessly over the top of the waves. And he knew Rocky's bio by heart.

It was a genuine rags-to-riches tale of a poor boy growing up in a cabin in the mountains of Tennessee. He had moved to Hawaii at the age of ten when his father was transferred with the Army. He taught himself to surf and by the age of 14, won his first local. He had rejected numerous college scholarships in order to travel the world gaining sponsors as he maintained the purity of the sport of surfing while traveling some of the most exotic and hazardous coastlines in the world.

He was a hero. He was a legend. He was also, apparently, a bit of a drunk.
Xander smiled weakly and attempted to take a step to the side. "Um, maybe we could talk later. Truth is, I gotta piss like a Russian race horse so, if you don't mind...."

Rocky matched him step for step and blocked Xander's exit. Fritz, who had been discreetly standing by, hoped Rocky wasn't going to make an ass of himself...again. When it became obvious that he was, Fritz started to ease over. Rocky ignored the warning glare his partner was giving him and he loomed over Xander with an ugly sneer. "Hear that, Fritz? Baby boy says he gotta piss. You need help with that, boy?"

In a fast move Xander never saw coming, Rocky grabbed Xander in the crotch and squeezed his dick painfully. The hurt shot through Xander's cock and balls and he responded with an iron clamp around Rocky's wrist which he tightened till he could almost feel the bones grind together. Xander would not be bullied. "Now, you want to let go of me or do you want to surf in this fucking contest with a broken
For the next ten seconds, no one moved. Their eyes locked but neither's reflected the pain they were enduring at the hands of the other. Finally, with a bellowing, foul-smelling laugh, Rocky released his hold on Xander's dick and Xander cautiously let go of Rocky's wrist. Still, neither man blinked and their wordless stare was point, counterpoint. It said everything that needed to be said.

For Xander, it told him that Rocky Coons was a has-been. A washed up alcoholic whose time had passed and who was hanging on to a glory that no longer shone. For Rocky, it confirmed his worst fears. This was the face of the future. The boys who would reap the rewards from all his hard work. The ones who would make the big bucks from the sponsors who were now backing the sport of surfing as they tried to kick Rocky aside.

Both competitors were saddened by what they saw but gave no measure. As the heat of the confrontation cooled, Fritz threw his arm around
Rocky's shoulder and led him away. "Come on, buddy, let's get a Coke and a burger before our next run. I don't know about you but I'm hungry as fuck."

Xander watched them go and he saw to the business of his bladder, cringing as his cock complained about the crude, rough treatment it had endured. When he finished, he headed back to his friends. His back was a little straighter and his resolve steeled. He held his head high and he knew, win or lose, that would never be his future.

"Hey, good, you're back. They made an announcement that the first team up is Warner and Ho. They're taking their boards to the shore now. Come on."

Xander joined his partner and they made their way through the crush of people lining the shore to watch the ride. When the spectators saw who they were, the crowd separated like the Red Sea, allowing them to pass. When they stepped up to their vantage point, Xander leaned over and spoke in Riley's ear. "Up to now, we have been on the
defensive. We have followed the lead of the others and tried to match them move for move, but we are done. From this point on, we go on the offense. Nothing they do matters. We are the leaders here and our runs will show that. Fuck them. This is our competition."

Riley turned to his partner and saw the confidence and conviction on his face. He nodded, grinned and the two clasped hands before turning their backs on team #3 who had entered the water. From there, Xander and Riley retreated to a far corner of the beach and for the next ninety minutes, they talked. They planned, drew diagrams in the sand and they approached this as they would any other sporting event.

They listened intently as each team was called into the wash and they knew their time was drawing near, but now they were no longer nervous. They were prepared and the plans they discussed were set and firm. The continued rehashing was only to reinforce their confidence and solidify their partnership.
The other four alternated their attention between the action in the water and the conference off to the side in the sand. While they could see Xander and Riley, at this point even Spike knew to let them be. He could see the intensity between them and he did not want his presence to be a distraction. Sitting cross-legged, he poked Willow on the knee.

"Do you think they are worried?"

Willow squinted off into the distance where team #23 was huddled as she considered Spike's question. Even at this distance, she recognized the look on the boys' faces and she grinned. "Nope. In fact, I would say it's the other teams that had better be concerned now."

Before Spike could respond, the crowd on the shoreline erupted into applause as team #21 emerged from the water, dragging their boards through the sand and dropping in satisfied exhaustion. It had been a good ride. A clean ride. But had it been a winning ride? That remained to be
seen. Within minutes, the loud speaker cracked and boomed.

"TEAM #23. HARRIS AND FINN. REPORT TO THE WATER."

There was nothing else to say. Xander jumped to his feet. He grabbed his board and, as always, Riley followed Xander's lead. Together, exuding the very image of youthful confidence and virility that the Brown Bodies oil company was seeking, the boys ran across the sand and without slowing, dove into the water to the roar of an appreciative crowd.

They started out, keeping a measured distance between them. Close enough to prove that they were a unified team and far enough to give the other room to maneuver without the fear of cramping or colliding.

As the afternoon wore on, the height and ferocity of the waves had increased and it was more and more difficult to move against the tide. Every muscle in their arms strained yet they gave no thought to
pausing to rest. On they pushed as the combination of the constant deluge of salt water on their faces and the pull of the undertow beneath them threatened to force them off course.

Still they persevered. The cheers and encouragement of the crowds on the beach worked like a massive team of cheerleaders to egg them on. Out. Out. Out. Further and further they went, trusting that the other was still at their side but knowing that if they stopped to check, a break in rhythm would be disastrous.

The blazing sun, magnified by the surface of the water, baked their backs and legs as it repeatedly washed over them, basting them like a couple of Christmas turkeys. Then, as the hurt threatened to consume them, their bodies reached the athlete's wall and they caught their second wind. Despite all their discomfort, years of sports training had taught the boys to disregard the physical pain and focus on the mentality of the challenge.

Instinct, the feel of the ocean beneath him and the
air around him told Xander when they had arrived. When the spot was just right. He made no effort to shout, trying to be heard over the constant roar of the ocean. It wasn't necessary. Riley would follow his lead. He always did.

Together, they front-flipped and turned their boards into the direction of the flow and they laid down flat, allowing the ocean to toss them about like pop bottles thrown overboard to bob and float on the surface of the sea. It was a brief time of recuperation. A time to give their strong hearts a chance to slow to a near normal pace before the next straining event.

And it didn't take long to feel the physiological shift. Within minutes, the blood flow slowed through their veins. The burning feel in their lungs eased and their respiration rate backed down. The tight screaming in their biceps quietened and by holding their faces down toward their chests, they were able to breathe without the constant feeling of near drowning.
They were ready.

Xander pushed himself into a sitting position, straddling his board as a signal to his partner who then did the same. Though separated by a great distance, Riley waved his hand to signal to his leader and Xander responded by again flipping onto his stomach. Together, they dropped their arms into the water and they began to paddle. Harder and harder. Faster and faster.

From behind and beneath them it came. A wave of monstrous proportions, it shouted and roared its wild outrage at the mortals who invaded its territory. At the first feel of its strength and size, both boys stopped paddling and grabbed the rim of their boards. They took a moment to balance and stabilize themselves, then......as the mob on the beach howled in one huge collective voice...they leapt effortlessly to their feet and the ride was on!

Using the judges' sheet of rules as a game plan, Xander and Riley incorporated as many of the moves described as possible. They rode, aiming
their boards directly toward each other and cutting sideways through the wave, appearing as if they had lost control and a collision was imminent.

The reaction on the beach was frenzied. The spectators shouted their warnings only to explode in laughter and appreciative applause as the riders crossed over each other's wake and turned again toward shore. From that moment on, team #23 owned the day. They walked their boards casually as if strolling down the street. They stood. They crouched. They turned and they expertly dragged out what should have been a short ride to an unbelievable length. This was their rodeo. They had lassoed the wild Pacific and beaten the bucking bronco.

This time the pounding in their hearts was from the thrill of triumph! They were gods. They owned the world.

When they finally slid onto the sandy beach, the mob that rushed them was every bit as overwhelming and frightening as the Pacific ocean.
They were hoisted on the shoulders of strangers and carried back to their blanketed nest as the loudspeaker blared.

"TEAM #6. COONS AND GAREN. REPORT TO THE WATER."

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**Part Forty-Five**

Xander and Riley sat in the center of the blankets as their close-knit group of supporters circled around them, effectively cutting off their view of the dramatic scene that was playing out in the ocean. What they could not block was the appreciative roar of the crowd that told them that even drunk, team #6, led by Rocky Coons was still the best there was.

"Don't sweat them, Xan. You two were incredible out there. Coons and Garen may be good but you
guys were bloody brilliant. When it comes down to the final two, there is no way you guys aren't going to be one of them."

Without thinking about it, Cordelia nodded and placed her hands on Xander's bent knees the way she had done a thousand times before. "It's true, Xan. Spike might be a pushy little bitch but he's right. We watched all the other teams and they were good but they can't hold a candle to you. Unless those fucking judges are brain dead, the final run has to come down to teams #23 and #6."

Spike ducked his head and grinned. Cordelia's crude comments about him sounded more obligatory than vindictive. It wasn't a total forgiveness but it was a reluctant understanding that contained a big scoop of acceptance. And it didn't go unnoticed by the rest. The group was solid. The group was cohesive and strong and, win or lose, Xander's world was on the right track.

Together they chatted nervously, avoiding the subject of surfing. They instead discussed the
weather and picked apart the fine points of the new repaving project over on Milton Drive. They fell temporarily silent when the cheers of the spectators signaled the arrival on shore of team #6.

They dropped their heads and joined hands. They held their breath. They were unaware of the huge group of supporters that flocked around them to offer support to the favored team of local boys. The moment dragged on as the air of anticipation grew heavy. Xander was amazed at the immense amount of comfort and reassurance he gained from the feel of his fingers interlaced with Spike's. It felt so natural. It calmed his soul and when Spike scraped his fingernail across Xander's palm, it made him grin as it stirred in his groin.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. ATTENTION ON THE BEACH! WE HAVE COMPLETED OUR TABULATION AND ARE ABOUT TO NAME THE FINAL TWO TEAMS WHO WILL COMPETE FOR THE TITLE OF BROWN BODY SURFING CHAMPIONS OF 1965. WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK ALL OF THE TEAMS WHO HAVE
PARTICIPATED AND WE ARE IMPRESSED WITH THE SKILL OF ALL INVOLVED, HOWEVER, AS YOU KNOW, THERE CAN ONLY BE ONE WINNER. WITH THAT IN MIND...THE FINAL TWO TEAMS ARE...#6, COONS AND GAREN, AND #23, HARRIS AND FINN. CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR FINAL TEAMS AND WHILE WE TAKE A ONE HOUR BREAK BEFORE THE FINAL RUN, WE ENCOURAGE EVERYONE TO STOP BY OUR BOOTH AND CHECK OUT OUR...."

Nothing else the judges said mattered. As soon as their number was announced, the entire group leapt to their feet, threw their hands up, shouted their joy as their voices blended with the cheers of the strangers who had already pegged the Sunnydale boys as the winners.

Xander and Riley threw their arms around each other and bounced. They laughed and hugged and no matter what the outcome, they were already winners. Just to have come this far was a dream come true. Finally, Riley laughed and pushed back. "Damn, now I gotta piss. I'll be back." And he darted off.
Still hooting and leaping, Riley blended into the rush of beach bodies and disappeared. Xander turned to the others with a glint of mischief on his face. With an air of excitement snapping and crackling all around him, Xander first cupped Willow's face in his hands and he kissed her soundly on the mouth. He then repeated the act with Buffy and, pretending to be totally caught up in the moment, he then grabbed Spike. He pulled the boy to him, drew their faces close and just before diving in, he winked.

Then their lips met. Xander tipped his head slightly and he moaned softly and quietly so only Spike could hear. The people around them roared with laughter and applauded believing that Xander had been so overcome with the thrill of the moment that he had kissed a boy by mistake. His friends, Cordelia included, smiled knowingly. Xander and Spike were no mistake.

Then they all started talking at once. They babbled, laughed, voiced concerns and dismissed the same. Although he hadn't eaten all day, Xander knew
putting food in his nervous stomach would be a huge mistake so he and Spike talked about picking up a pizza for the bonfire later. It was a plan that was not dependent on the outcome of the next run. Just as Xander leaned over to say something snarky to Buffy about her chewed fingernails, a cloud of grainy sand was kicked into his face.

"HEY!"

"Oh, sorry about that baby boy. Guess I didn't notice you sitting there. Hope I didn't hurt you. I would hate to see anything disqualify you now."

Without waiting for a response, Rocky barked out a laugh and he staggered away.

The girls scowled, swore and brushed the sand off their blankets and out of their hair. Spike scooted up onto his knees and considered running after the brute and punching him soundly. Xander's reaction was entirely different. An expression of apprehension and fear darkened his eyes as he frantically looked all around. "Where's Riley? He
shouldn't have been gone this long. Oh, Jesus Christ! We need to go find him! NOW!"

The others didn't wait for or need an explanation. Immediately, they all jumped to their feet and they ran in the direction of the outhouses. Spreading out as they went and visually scanning the crowds, they grew more and more concerned when there was no sign of him.

When they reached the wooden shack, Xander charged in and instantly shouted back out. "Get the paramedics! Get them here fast!"

The girls ran for the judges' station where the ambulance was parked. It was a state mandate that any sporting event deemed this dangerous required an ambulance and two paramedics standing by in case one of the waves proved to be the victor. As they ran off, Spike rushed in and skidded to a stop.

"Oh, fuck! Shit, Xan is he...?"

Xander knelt on the floor and cradled Riley's bloody
head in his lap. He had checked for pulse and respiration and was relieved to find both strong and regular. Before Xander could answer, Riley groaned as his eyes fluttered open.

"Oooo. Damn. What the fuck happened? Christ, it feels like my head is exploding."

Xander rocked back and forth as he gently brushed his hand over Riley's forehead. "Shh. Don't talk. The paramedics will be here in a minute. Somebody conked you on the back of the head. Did you see who did it?"

Riley cringed. Thinking just made the pain worse, but he tried. He remembered entering the stall. He remembered taking a much needed piss and he recalled someone stepping out of the stall beside him just seconds before he fell into a black pit of hell.

"No. It happened too fast. Who would do this? I sure didn't have any money on me. What else could they...oh, fuck. Does this have something to do
The rest of his question died as the small, funky bathroom was packed with an influx of people. Xander and Spike were ushered out as the paramedics squeezed in with their huge carrying case of equipment and began efficiently and professionally assessing and caring for their patient.

"What happened here?"

Still wringing his hands with worry, Xander turned toward the authoritative voice and was surprised to see all three of the judges on hand. "It's Riley, my partner, somebody cold-cocked him. He's really hurt. There was blood everywhere. He...."

Xander's voice cracked with emotion and he looked away. George Smith, the lead judge, put his arm around Xander's shoulders in consolation.

"I'm sorry, son. We were all pulling for you and having to drop out at this point in the competition is rough but hey, there's always next year and you
two can...."

"NO!"

The fierce tone in Spike's voice as he stepped forward brought all the attention on him. Even the judges were caught off guard.

"No, I've read all the rules several times and I know them by heart. It is spelled out that if one of the participants is injured or incapacitated, the team is allowed one substitution with the judges' approval. Well, I'm asking you right now to approve me. I'll be the other half of team #23."

Xander was dumbstruck. A dozen objections spun through his head, starting with the near drowning just two days earlier and ending with Spike's lack of experience in a situation this intense. Before anyone could answer, the paramedics wheeled Riley out on the gurney. His head was swathed in bandages and his face was contorted in pain and regret as they hustled him away.
Judge Smith frowned and looked back and forth between Xander and Spike. He then huddled up with the other judges and minions where the consensus between them was that this whole event had the smell of booze and jealousy written all over it. However, with no supportive evidence, no accusations could be made. What they could do was try to tip the scale just enough to possibly restore the balance. With a mutual agreement and a collective nod of their heads, Judge Smith turned back to the anxiously waiting group.

"We agree. Now, you have only forty minutes left until the final ride, which as you know will be a skilled tandem ride, so we suggest you get together and decide if you think you can do it. If you decide not to try, just hang back. If you don't report, we will call you late and your team will be disqualified. We leave it entirely up to you."

Spike bubbled. He grabbed the judge's hand and pumped it enthusiastically while Xander picked his jaw off the ground and attempted to sort out his thoughts.
Part Forty-Six

This was a major decision. One that required a joint meeting of the minds and an input by every member of the Sunnydale pit crew. After the judges left, returning to their thrones in the small blue shack, the five remaining friends immediately retreated to the secluded cove adjacent to the beach. They had forty-five minutes to decide.

"There is no other choice, Xan. The only other person who has ever ridden tandem with you is Cordy, and (A), there are no girls allowed in this competition and (B), you said yourself that she sucked at surfing."

Cordelia put her fists on her hips and a scowl on her face at Spike's insulting, although not totally inaccurate evaluation of her athletic skills. "Hey! I resent that! I'll have you know, I would have been great out there if I hadn't been wearing my red two-piece. The water kept shoving my top down and I had to hold it up or show the fish my magnificent duo. So, smart ass, I could so be Xander's partner."
She then slumped dramatically as all the fight seemed to go out of her. In truth, the aforementioned gender restriction was a great relief, though she endeavored to look remorseful. "Unfortunately, you're right. No girls allowed. Face it Xan, we're out of choices. It's gonna have to be Oliver Twist here or we default."

Xander had been pacing back and forth. His swim trunks had air dried and he had pulled his sandy t-shirt on over his gritty, sun reddened back. His hands were clasped behind him and his head hung down as he mentally sifted through all the possible outcomes to this day. The verbal bantering between the others sailed past his ear like a buzzing mosquito. It was inconsequential. The words carried no point or counterpoint that he had not already considered from every angle.

This was beyond the need for the prize money. This was about the need to compete and **win**. This was about showing the old, drunken guard that it was time to step aside for the next wave of champions.
This was about completing what he had started. And this was for Riley. His partner and friend. A boy who had earned his way into the inner circle the hard way. No, they had come too far. Walking away and losing to a default was not an option.

But then there was Spike. A boy who had appeared out of nowhere to rock Xander's world, make him question his sexuality and stir within him feelings and ideas he could never have imagined. His foolish recklessness had almost cost Spike his life. It would be selfish of him to put Spike in that position again. And worst case scenario, what if something happened and this time Xander was too late. What if Spike....

Xander stopped walking and his face went pale and slack and his stomach churned in fear. Suddenly, before his visions of doom and gloom could expand, he was startled back to reality by a small set of fingers snapping in his face.

"Xander! Damn it! This is no time to daydream! We only have thirty minutes left. You need to snap out
of it. Besides, while you were off in la-la land, we all took a vote. I'm in. Like it or not, I'm your new partner."

Xander shook his head as his eyebrows creased low. "No, Spike. No way. It's too dang...."

"Xander! Don't treat me like a child. I'm nearly grown! I'll be eighteen in a few weeks just like you. That's grown. That's a man! No one can tell me what to do and I say Yes!"

Xander's expression slowly shifted. The lines, the lips and the eyes all went from down-turned to uplifted as the glow of love shone through. He thought he had considered all sides of this conundrum but now realized he had ignored the most obvious. The winning meant nothing. What mattered was that he and Spike would cross the finish line together. Even if they came in dead last. They would do this together.

"Well, all right then! Yes! Hell yes! You are the man! Let's fucking do this!"
The girls cheered as Xander snatched Spike off the ground and swung him around in a circle, his bare feet dangling in the air. When he finally set him down he kissed him firmly on the mouth while grabbing both his hands.

"Oh, um just one thing, Xan. I may be the man but I'm afraid we will need to swing by and get my Da's permission first."

~*~*~*~*~

"WHAT? Are you fucking kidding me? A tandem ride? Are those fucking judges crazy? They know I'm a solo act. I don't ride double like a fucking homo with anybody! Now you get your fucking ass over there and tell them that!"

Fritz summoned up every ounce of restraint he had in him not to just punch his partner in the nose and walk away. He had already made the decision that after this competition, they would part ways. He
still had a respect for the purity of the sport and hated what his partner was twisting it into.

Years ago, Rocky had been like the boys of team #23. Honest, fair, young and full of the thrill of the ocean's power. They had met and surfed in a time when surfing was just becoming recognized and there were no prizes or accolades, only the love of the sport. Ironically, it was all the attributes that Rocky displayed, the skill and innocence that brought world-wide attention to surfing and, in turn, caused his corruption. Now, he was just a mean drunk and Fritz couldn't wait to be away from him.

"I'm not telling them anything, Rocky. They already suspect you had something to do with that poor kid's busted head. I don't think you want to do anything else to bring attention to yourself. Now, there is one last run. We still have a fair chance of winning if you will just shut your fucking mouth, put down the flask and surf."

Rocky growled at his partner's insolence and
although he would never admit it, he knew Fritz was right. It was all slipping through his fingers like the sand they stood on, and winning this competition could bring it back. His face would be on every billboard in the country, tan, smiling and selling Brown Bodies Tanning Oil. His name would be on the lips of every surfing fanatic and he would be back on top of the world where he belonged.

"Fine. Fine. You fucking win, but I'm on top. I'm on top and when we stand, I take the back of the board. Do you think you can do that without fucking it up? Can you keep the nose balanced without tanking us?"

Fritz's only answer was to roll his eyes and walk away to prepare for their ride.

~*~*~*~*~

"Hi, Da. Can we talk to you for a minute?"

Rupert Giles tore his attention away from the
concentrated task of applying a copious amount of tanning oil to Jenny's back to look up as his son approached. "William. Of course. Oh, Xander, we have been following your success intently. Well done, lad. Well done!"

Xander glanced over at Spike who nodded, encouraging his boyfriend to ask for his hand in partnership.

"Thank you, Mr. Giles. That's why we're here. You may not have heard, but my partner Riley suffered an injury and is unable to ride in the final run."

Jenny's smile disappeared and she sat up next to her future husband. She was a native of Sunnydale and, as such, she understood what having a local boy bring the championship here could mean. It was pride for the community. It was money for the businesses and it was encouragement for other boys who aspired to shoot for the stars. "Darn, Xander, what are you going to do?"

Rupert looked back and forth between his son and
the boy he was emotionally involved with. He watched as their hands twitched nervously and continually brushed against each other while their fingers almost, but never quite, interlaced. He read the guilty silence in their faces and he knew exactly what they were planning to do.

"No, William. No. You very nearly drowned the last time you went into the water and I do not allow you to risk it again. I have already lost your mother, I can't even think of living if anything happened to you."

Rupert snatched off his glasses and began polishing the lenses as his voiced cracked with emotion.

Jenny reached over and gently brushed her hand over his arm soothingly. It didn't anger or hurt her that his heart still broke for the woman he loved and lost. It only made her affection for him stronger to know that he was capable of such depths of devotion. "Rupy, William is not a child. You can't hold him safe forever. I've known Xanny Harris since he was a little boy and he is a wonderful young
man. Your William is in good hands."

Rupert stared deeply into her eyes and wondered if she was still talking about surfing. In the end, he decided it didn't much matter. His William was a young man on the brink of adulthood. Perhaps it was time to let go. Just a little.

"I'm not totally on board with this, William, and Xander, I charge you to not take any unnecessary risks. Jenny and I will be watching. Oh, and speaking of Jenny and me...."

"Thanks, Da!!! You won't be sorry! Xan knows what he's doing. He's gonna be the new surfing champ and I'm gonna help him! Whoopee!!! Look, we gotta go. They're gonna be calling us up soon. You better come too if you want to get a good spot on the shore to see us win!"

"Yes, William, but Jenny and I...."

Spike and Xander were gone. Rushing back to their nest and their friends, team #23 put their hands
into a circle and were joined by the others. This was for Riley. This was for the win. This was for them all. Together, they gave a unified cheer before Xander grabbed his board and he and Spike headed for the shore.

Part Forty-Seven

"ATTENTION ON THE BEACH. LADIES AND GENTLEMEN MAY WE HAVE YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE. WE WANT TO TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT OF THE BROWN BODIES SURFING COMPETITION OF 1965. IT HAS BEEN A THRILLING DAY AND THE BEST IS YET TO COME. LADIES AND GENTLEMEN WE ARE JUST MOMENTS AWAY FROM THE FINAL ROUND AND THE CROWNING OF THE WINNERS. FIRST, WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR A ROUND OF APPLAUSE FOR ALL OF OUR PARTICIPANTS!"
A roar of appreciation rose up over the crowd and the beach came alive with hoots, cheers and clapping hands. When the uproar finally leveled off, the announcement continued.

"BEFORE WE BEGIN, WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT RILEY FINN OF TEAM #23 WAS INJURED AND IS UNABLE TO CONTINUE."

The sea of spectators groaned. Murmurs of gossip, concern and speculation swept across the beach as those who had already placed money on the underdogs wondered if this would negate their wager. Quickly, before things could fall apart, the judge resumed.

"AS PROVIDED BY THE RULES COMMITTEE, THERE HAS BEEN A LAST MINUTE SUBSTITUTION. XANDER HARRIS HAS GIVEN US THE NAME OF SPIKE GILES AS THE PARTNER WHO WILL BE COMPETING IN THE FINAL ROUND. SO AS THE LEAD JUDGE IN TODAY'S CONTEST, I WELCOME SPIKE GILES AND I WISH BOTH
TEAMS GOOD LUCK. NOW WITHOUT FURTHER ADO, GENTLEMEN, ENTER THE WATER!!"

Like the firing of a starter gun, those four words signaled the launching of the surfers and boards into the ocean waves as the crowd thundered their encouragement. Just as they had done during practice, Spike launched first and quickly hopped on. As soon as they entered waist-deep water, Xander used the power in his arms to lift himself and lower his weight carefully onto Spike's back.

The instant their bodies connected, Xander's mind blanked and his rhythm faltered. A heat rushed over his crotch and he pressed his cock against Spike's butt. He moaned and whispered into Spike's ear.

"Oh fuck. It feels so fucking good to lay on top of you."

Spike stiffened. He was not about to let that happen. Not now. Sternly, he turned his face to the side and he barked, "Stop that. You get your mind back where it belongs!"
Spike's tone, accompanied by a sudden splash of sea water in his face, was the slap of reality that he needed. He muttered a brief, "Right," before he got down to business.

Little did they know that the other team was experiencing a moment of fumbling discombobulation too. A time of trying to adjust to the uncomfortable, off-balance positioning of one man who was unaccustomed to such close physical contact with another. There was a brief struggle for dominance. A minute of assertion and concession. Quickly, however, both teams snapped back and the ride was on.

"GO, XANDER!! GO, SPIKE!! WOO WOO WOO!!!!!!"

Willow, Buffy and Cordelia jumped up and down on the shore. They waved their arms high over their heads and they shouted until their voices were raspy and hoarse. The late afternoon sun was lower on the horizon and now shone blindingly in their faces as they strained to watch the two teams who
pushed further and further out and into the ocean.

Tracking them became more and more difficult, as every once in a while they would disappear from sight when a wave rose over them and threatened to swamp them. Then just like a buoy they would bounce back to the surface and drive on.

Among the frontline observers were Jenny and a distraught Rupert who fretted and wrung his hands repeatedly as he complained, "Spike! They actually referred to William as 'Spike.' Can you still see them? I say, Jenny, can you spot them out there?"

Each time he asked, she answered reassuringly. "Yes, dear, they are still there. William is fine."

In truth, fine may have been a bit of an exaggeration. The driving pace was quickly taking its toll as Spike shouted to his partner, "How much further? Xan, my arms. I don't know if I can press on."

Xander too was tiring, but as an athlete it was a
feeling he knew well and could overcome. Yelling over the constant roar of the ocean, his arms dipped and scooped the water again and again.

"It's OK. Tuck your head away from the splash-back and catch your breath. Hold onto the rim of the board and let me do the work for a while. When you can, start again."

Spike nodded. He hated his own weakness but wasting time and effort on self-recrimination was counterproductive. He would do as he was told and resume again as soon as physically possible.

Meanwhile, nearly half a mile away across the expanse of ocean, the other team expended as much effort fighting each other as they did the ocean.

"Get your fucking weight up off me! I can't breathe!"

"Shut the fuck up! Paddle harder! I can't do all the work!"
"Pay attention! You're driving too hard with your right and we're straying to the side!"

"Fuck! Fuck! I ought to drown your fucking ass!"

"Shut the fuck up and paddle!"

Further and further they went as the mob on the beach watched them grow smaller and smaller, until they seemed to be absorbed into the sun.

"We're almost there, Spike, can you feel it?"

Xander could hardly speak as his lungs burned from the strain and his heart pounded so hard it felt like it might explode. Spike was even worse. He had again begun paddling and his arms were now numb, moving repetitiously almost of their own volition. He feared if he stopped again, he would never be able to restart.

When he heard Xander call back to him, he blinked his confusion. Feel it? Feel what? It was the ocean.
It was endless water drenching and swamping them. It was a powerful undertow constantly trying to drag them under. It was the same on top of more.

He didn't respond. He had no ability to ask and quickly decided it didn't matter. He trusted Xander's instincts implicitly and the promise of this torture soon ending was almost too much to pray for.

Finally, Xander stopped. He pulled his hands from the water and he gripped the rim of the board. With a moan of relief, Spike did the same and was immediately struck with wrenching charley-horses in both biceps.

There they rested. In the same way they had during their lessons, they let their bodies go limp on the board as they regained strength. They let the force of the waves toss them to and fro while they simply relaxed. After a few moments, Spike felt the body above him shift and lift and he waited for Xander's instruction.
Gently, Xander kissed Spike on the side of his neck, tasting the fishy, salty flavor of the sea, and he spoke clearly into his ear. "This is it. We're going to sit up. We do it just like we practiced. Remember to use your left leg like a rudder. After we turn in the water, I want you to get ready for my signal. Trust me, baby, I won't let anything happen to you. I love you Spike."

Spike looked back over his shoulder. The unexpected declaration startled him but the words felt so natural as they fell on his ear that all he could do was smile. "I'm ready. You tell me when and I promise I won't let you down. I trust you, Xan. I love you too."

Team #23 fought against the current of the waves and turned to prepare themselves.

~*~*~*~*~

“Damn it, Coons, you’re going too far. We’ll miss the peak and hit the slump. Turn! Turn here or we’ll
be fighting the undertow.”

Coons' arms dipped in the water as he tried to continue pushing them. It was a move that countered the actions of his partner whose own efforts to slow and turn them were causing a wild splashing and flailing. Finally, exhausted, they both stopped as their board rose and fell at the mercy of the wild ocean.

“Are you fucking trying to make us lose or just fucking drown?”

Fritz Garen knew in his heart that they had already lost. Team #6 was no longer competing against the other surfers. They were too busy fighting each other. Slumped on the board and crushed beneath the weight of a man who was making no effort to support himself, Fritz controlled his breathing and slowed his heart rate. Without comment or spoken agreement, they turned the board.

Slightly drunk, Rocky over-balanced as he tried to sit up and it took everything Garen had to keep them
stable in the water. He wanted to shout. He wanted to punch this disgusting pain-in-the-ass in the nose but he knew that would only make Rocky more obstinate and obnoxious.

For Coons, the shame and alcohol worked together to fuel his irrational temper and he shouted over the boom of the waves.

“Get ready! We go when I say so! Don’t you fuck this up, Garen!”

Both teams waited.

~*~*~*~*~

They were lifted and dropped by smaller, impotent waves that an experienced surfer could read easily. They used the time to rest and prepare both mentally and physically. Then, just as Spike was becoming relaxed and starting to enjoy the sun and surf and sea gulls, he felt the shift in the body that was pressed against his back.
He gripped the board that he was straddling to prevent being dunked as an unusually rough wave crashed up under and all around them. Xander knew it was a precursor. An early warning to what was coming. Immediately he grabbed the rim and he lifted himself.

“This is it, Spike! Belly down and hold on. I’ll drive us and when I say, ‘now!’ you get to your feet. Don’t think about it and don’t hesitate!”

Spike’s body went rigid with terror. It grabbed his stomach like a punch and he feared he might pass out. His vision went white and the whoosh in his ears was no longer from the ocean’s roar. Dumbly, he clamped his fingers tightly around the board’s rim and his head bobbed up and down as he flipped back onto his stomach. When Xander’s weight dropped onto him, Spike fought the urge to scream.

Spike swallowed around the lump in his throat as Xander’s arms started them moving. Forward.
Forward. Faster. Faster. Higher. Higher. Suddenly, Xander pulled his arms from the water and he latched onto the sides of the board as the ocean picked up the momentum and drove them at an incredible speed. There was no stopping. No turning back.

“NOW!”

In a flash, Spike stopped thinking and he just reacted. His body was flushed with a warmth and peace he had never known as he did everything Xander had taught him. He shoved with his arms and he leapt to his feet.

And he stumbled.

Before he could panic, a strong, secure arm wrapped around him and gave him a chance to find his footing. At the same time he heard the laughter behind him and knew they were up. The ride was on and they flew as though on the wings of a hawk.

It was stunning! It was magnificent, and Spike was
certain he could feel the breath of God himself puffing against their backs to push them faster.

And always reminding him that he was not alone, was the man behind him. He constantly brushed and bumped him. Xander gently glanced and touched the novice surfer to give him confidence, and whenever it appeared he was tilting too far in any one direction, he offered a nonstop string of reassurances and encouragements.

The ride was exhilarating. It was like free-falling without a parachute and Spike was almost disappointed when he finally looked up and saw the shoreline rushing toward them.

In what seemed like an eternity in a flashbulb, it was over. When the wave suddenly fell into an explosion of foam and froth, Spike and Xander tumbled into waist-deep water as the crowd on the shore roared their applause and approval before rushing into the water to meet them.

Suddenly they felt a million hands grasping and
pulling at them.

They were hoisted onto strange shoulders and paraded across the sands toward the judges' stand. It was only then, when Judge Smith demanded quiet, did they learn that team #6 had been disqualified when Coons punched Garen in the back of the head, sending them both tumbling into the drink.

They had won!

Team #23 was crowned Brown Bodies Surfing Champions of 1965, and although Spike knew that was a crown due Riley's head, he couldn’t help but feel a measure of pride that he had helped. When he looked over and saw the sparkle of love in Xander’s eyes, Spike knew he had won far more than a contest.

Spike felt like the king of the world.
Part Forty-Eight

Spike paced back and forth restlessly. He turned on the radio in the living room only to twist the knob back off moments later when the music served to aggravate his already twitchy, nervous state.

He had checked his hair a dozen times in the bathroom mirror and changed his shirt and shorts twice. And now he waited. He shoved back the curtains and gazed out into the day's fading light. Each time he heard the sound of an approaching vehicle coming down the street, his pulse quickened and his face brightened only to fall again as it passed without slowing.

The two hours after their win had been fast and furious. There had been pictures taken, hundreds of hands to shake and autographs to give. The crowds had been excited to a level that Spike found almost frightening as they crushed in on them. The judges
and sponsors had made long, droning speeches and Xander had contracts to sign.

At some point, an announcement was made that Riley's condition was good. He had a minor concussion and would be released from the hospital the next day. Spike and Xander both gave a silent prayer of thanks. During the shuffle and shove of it all, team #23 had been separated and finally shouted an agreement to meet up at Spike's house before the bonfire.

With a reluctant wave goodbye, Spike had allowed his father and Jenny to drive him home. Sitting in the back seat, he tried to look encouraging and delighted at their surprise announcement of coupleism but in truth, he was still flying high from the exhilaration of the surf and the win, and all he could think of was Xander.

And now he was getting worried. He looked at the wall clock again and the self-doubts he had felt nipping at his heels began to threaten to devour him. What if Xander had forgotten about him. Had
he gone off with his real friends? Was he already at the cove? Was his declaration of love only meant as a reassurance that he wouldn't let Spike fall during the surf? Was he...was...Cordelia...?

Anticipation was turning to despondence as Spike dropped down onto the sofa. He fiddled with the buttons on his plaid cotton shirt and he promised himself that he would not jump up again. Every car that sped by the house was more disappointment he didn't need. Not even this one. With the loud muffler. That seemed to be slowing. That sounded like it was pulling up out front. THAT STOPPED AND SHUT DOWN! Spike launched himself from the couch and ran to jerk open the door just in time to see Xander, grinning like a coon dog eating shit, leaning against the door of his wood-sided station wagon.

"Like her? She's all mine. I gave my uncle my half of the prize money as soon as I got home and he signed her over. Come on. Let's go for a ride."

Spike squealed like a stuck pig but made no move to
leave the house. "No. Not yet. I need you to come in for a minute first."

Xander shook his head and frowned. What on earth could be more important than a first ride in the brand-new secondhand car of his dreams? Shoving off, he lurched up the steps only to be grabbed and snatched in as the door was slammed behind him. Before he could ask, Xander found himself with an armload of wiggling, squirming blond who slammed their lips together in a heated, passionate kiss.

Within seconds, the car parked at the curb was not the only woody at the Giles residence.

Xander cupped Spike's face in his large calloused hands. With a stunned gasp, Xander broke the kiss and looked into Spike's wild eyes.

"Your dad?"

"Next door. It seems he and the lovely Miss Jenny are...."
Xander dove back in for another open-mouthed tongue lashing. He didn't give a flying fig if Rupert and the lovely Miss Jenny were baking brownies or tying each other to the bedposts. All he wanted to know was....

"How long?"

"Long enough. Do you want to, um...."

Spike needn't have been hesitant and there was no time for embarrassment when he was nearly jerked off his feet. Xander grabbed Spike by the hand and together they ran, laughingly, for the stairway up to heaven. When they hit the landing at the top of the steps, they spun to the left and darted inside.

Xander kicked off his shoes. "Should we lock the door?"

Spike whipped off his shirt. "Fuck the door. Ooo. I got lube."

Xander froze. He was in the middle of unzipping his
pants when the word 'lube' hit him like a brick and he whimpered. He looked up and saw Spike standing near the side of the bed. He wore a pair of tighty whities and a sheepish grin. Xander blinked owlishly as his cock snaked upward.

His eyes slowly took in the whole picture. Starting at the top of the curly, fluffy, white-blond hair down to the startling blue eyes and sharp cheekbones. Spike's skin was sun-reddened and displayed a stark, clear tan line. His chest and arms were trim and muscular and his stomach flat with just a fine sprinkling of dark blond hair that drew Xander's vision toward....

"Oh, Christ."

The bulge in his small, snug underwear displayed a heavy set of balls and poked out dramatically as the front outlined a proud, thick cock. Xander tried to think of something suave to say. "ACK," was the best he could do. He knew this was the way Cordelia had wanted him to feel when they fumbled together. This was what he tried unsuccessfully to
force and now, here it was. If it had been math, it was horny squared.

Xander short-shuffled forward as his fingers flexed in front of him. He wanted to touch everywhere and everything at once. When the space between them was closed, he waited. He felt like he should ask permission. It was so bold. Could he really...?

Spike was less hesitant as he took Xander's hand and placed it on the hard rod that filled the front of his white cotton underwear, encouraging him to cup and cradle. Then with his own hand on the back of Xander's, Spike pushed as he canted his hips forward. Both boys groaned at the incredible feelings that rushed through them. Xander's heart raced and his brain bubbled as they both stared down at the point of their physical connection.

"You're bigger than I thought."

"You've thought about my dick?"

"Geez yes. Ever since you...."
"Ever since I sucked your cock?"

"Oh, fuck!"

"All right but I think you'll need to take your pants off first."

Xander was torn. He wanted to get naked. Fast. But, he was reluctant to remove his palm from the most wonder peter on the planet. Sensing the conundrum, Spike finished unzipping his boyfriend's pants and he tugged them down. Xander was a boxers guy. Spike grinned. He liked that. He then slid both his hands inside and palmed the full, firm butt cheeks, coaxing Xander forward. Xander released the golden goose of dicks and slid his hands around Spike. Xander's hard cock pressed into Spike's cool belly and for a moment they just hugged. Finally, Spike whispered, "Are you ready? Do you want to?" Xander pulled him into a tight bear hug.

"I'm ready. I'm scared and I don't have a clue, but
my dick seems to think I'm ready."

Spike laughed and stepped back. He took Xander's hand and led him to the bed. Spike quickly tugged off his whities and his dick bounced free and bobbed to an appreciative audience. Xander stared at it and licked his lips. He immediately whipped off his Superman boxers and he and his soon-to-be lover climbed between the sheets. The top halves of their bodies were romantic. Sweet smiles. Coy, innocent looks. Soft, gentle kisses and whispers of unrhymed poetry. Below the waist it was a different story. Seeking, searching hands were everywhere. Touching. Stroking. Exploring. Poking and prodding as they shifted, moved and spread their legs open wide for easier access.

Growing bolder, Xander rolled over and climbed on top the smaller boy. His body surged with the sure knowledge that he was on the right track. Their mouths meshed and his tongue claimed ownership of the other as the kiss grew deeper and more frantic. Hot snorts of air from his nose blasted against Spike's cheek and Spike grew even harder at
the nearly frightening intensity of the boy on top.

Spike reached around and dragged his fingernails sharply down Xander's back as Xander humped into the pain and groaned his pleasure into the kiss. But it wasn't enough. Xander's cock was so stiff it hurt but it wanted more. When they broke the kiss, Spike saw the need in Xander's eyes. Xander had been the teacher on the boards now it was Spike's turn to take the lead. With his hXander's chest, he pushed.

"Roll over. Lay down on your back. I've never done this before but I know what to do."

Xander nodded and quickly fumbled around until their positions were reversed and his cock now pointed straight up, resting against the crack of Spike's ass. Spike laid down so they were belly to belly and chest to chest. Xander whimpered and strained not to come.

"Do you need a minute? Please don't come yet. I have dreamed of feeling you enter me and fill me
up with that wonderful cock of yours."

"Jesus Christ, Spike. If you don't want me to come, stop talking."

Spike chuckled at the pitiful whine in Xander's voice. Then, deciding there was no time like the present, Spike lifted up and back so that Xander's cock bounced forward between them. He reached over on the stand for the Vaseline and he went about the business of liberally coating the thick tool. Both boys stared in interest as the shaft and head were covered completely. When Xander felt the warning tingle in his balls and crotch, he grabbed Spike's wrist to stop him.

"That's enough. Wait. Fuck, I'm so close. Give me a minute."

Xander laid his head back and closed his eyes to try and distance himself from the erotic scene. He found that delaying his orgasm was more strenuous than the sports he played and as he waited, he could feel the sweat seeping from his pores. His
scalp was damp and his underarms and balls were sticky and musky smelling. Spike too was aware of Xander's condition. He sat there and reveled in the sight and smell of his lover. It was so masculine, so animalistic. His hand, still coated with the gel drifted to his own dick and began slowly moving up and down as the foreskin slid back and forth while he stared at the matching one that glistened, shiny and slick. Gradually, Spike began rocking back and forth while his hand gripped tighter and faster.

"Yeah. Oh, yeah." His breathy voice caught Xander's attention and his eyes popped open to see his boy masturbating on top of him.

"Damn, Spike. You look so good. Fuck, you better stop or this whole thing is over. Come on. I'm ready. Let's do it."

Spike's cock begged not to be released but he scolded it for its weak constitution and he let it go. It was angry at the deprivation and it scowled, red, swollen, and to accentuate its desperation, it oozed a thick drop of goo that rolled down the side. Spike
ignored it. He had other fish to fry. It seemed that every nerve ending in his body was now centered in his arse. His tiny, tight, brown ring would clamp shut screaming "No, No.", only to seconds later, relax and say "Come on in." It was silly. It was scary and the anticipation was sexually thrilling.

He nodded. He kissed Xander lightly on the lips and smiled. He lifted himself up and he reached between his legs. Spike positioned Xander's cock so that the head rested against his anal opening. He took a deep breath. He chewed his bottom lip in concentration and he lowered himself but it wouldn't go in. Xander petted Spike's arms reassuringly.

"Relax, baby. Let your body relax. You're too tense. I'll help."

Xander put his hands on Spike's butt and he pulled the cheeks wide open. Spike blew out the air he held and he felt his body respond. They tried again and were both shocked when the head suddenly popped through.
Instantly, Spike's body clamped in protest and Xander fought the urge to ram himself deep into the vise-like tunnel. After a moment, when he regained control, he pushed a little more and inch by inch Spike was finally sitting flat. The two boys stared at each other in wonder.

"You OK?"

"Yeah, it feels funny. It hurts a bit but not as much as I thought. Do you like it?"

"Like it? It's like fucking catsup on french fries! It's so fucking perfect they should bottle it and sell it on the fucking street corner!"

Spike giggled. "I think they do." He then experimentally lifted his hips and lowered them as he felt the drag over the cock inside him. Xander groaned and spread his thighs even wider so Spike did it again. Faster. Then again. Deeper. Then with one hand flat on Xander's chest and the other on his own dick, he leaned forward and got down to
business.

Xander's brain shut down. He gripped Spike's hips and grunted with each pump.

"Ugh. Ugh. Ugh."

The room was hot. It was steamy and smelled of sex and sweat. The sounds were animalistic with an undertone of innocence and awe as they mumbled, swore and tossed about words of love and devotion prefixed with profane, descriptive adjectives. Neither could last and neither cared. They were fucking. They were making love. They were sharing one body and pleasing two cocks. They needed to come.

Xander felt it first. The buzz that had never stopped humming in his nuts now shot sparks of blue pleasure up his spine and down to his toes. His hips snapped high and hard upward seeking the deepest point possible in which to pump his seed. When he felt the head swell and thicken, he rammed Spike down and held him in place as he gushed out, filling
his boy with hot thick streams of sticky love.

For Spike, the rough treatment, combined with his own hand and the shifting, scrunched faces Xander made as he fucked all worked together to rush him towards his own release. When he felt the hot fluid in his bowels, he hunched forward as the cock in his hand jerked, twitched and emptied onto Xander's belly. For a few brief seconds, neither boy cared about the other. All that mattered was the intense pleasure that wracked and rushed through their bodies in a series of waves more powerful that any the ocean had thrown at them.

Then, floating on a euphoric wash of foam and froth, they coasted in to shore and landed on the beach of afterglow.

"Wow."

"Hell yeah. We're gonna do a lot of that."

"OK."
Spike sat comfortably in the passenger's seat of the woody wagon. He and the driver snickered, giggled and continuously picked and poked at each other as the car rumbled down the road. The sun had, just moments earlier, dipped below the horizon and the sky still glowed with the last remnants of the most amazing, wonderful day of their lives.

When they pulled up to the edge of the cove, Xander looked all around quickly and after assuring himself that no one was around, he leaned over and gently kissed the lips of the boy beside him. Spike's hand came up and softly stroked his boyfriend's cheek feeling the stubble of a late-day beard.

"I love you, Spike."
"I love you too. Forever and for always."

Xander kissed him again then flipped the handle and opened his door.

"Come on. The rest of the gang'll be waiting. The sun's down and they'll be lighting the bonfire. We don't want to miss that. Damn, I wish Riley could be here."

Spike scooted across the bench seat and scrambled out Xander's side behind him. Brazenly, with a fuck-the-world attitude, Spike interlaced his fingers with Xander's and as they walked over the dunes, their locked hands swung casually between them.

They plodded over the mounds of sand and flattened the stray sprouts of weeds with their sandals. The only usable light now came from the half moon that had risen overhead and their journey was more by memory than sight. When they cleared the last hump and rounded the bend that entered the cove, they were met with cheers as Willow and Cordelia rushed to meet them. Sitting
off to the side on a rock near the mouth of the cave slumped Oz. When he saw them he gave a "Yo!" and raised his beer bottle in salute.

Sending out a high-pitched squeal that was on two decibels below what a bat could hear, Willow threw her arms around Xander's neck and sprang up and down, jerking his head each time till he feared whiplash was setting in and he had to stop her.

"Oh my God! You guys won!! You actually won!! You're going to be famous!!"

Xander rolled his eyes and huffed, "Well, I doubt that. Still, it was keen. Yeah, I can honestly say that this was the biggest day of my life. It gets a star AND a red letter."

Cordelia waited hesitantly. It felt strange not to be standing at Xander's side and basking in the cast-off energy of his success. She eyed Spike warily till finally she moved forward and with a "Fuck it," she grabbed Xander's face and planted a huge congratulatory kiss on his surprised lips. When she
pulled away and looked over, Spike wore a look that carried no possessive anger or animosity. He just grinned with pride and joy. Maybe, Cordy realized, part of growing up meant finding your own slot in life and sometimes it's not what you thought it would be. At any rate, the Sunnydale gang was all right and that was what mattered most.

"Come on. We've been waiting for you. Let's light it! Who has matches?"

In response to Willow's question, Xander dug into his pocket and pulled out an old flip-top lighter. It was the Boy Scout in him. Always be prepared. Bring a lighter to a bonfire and go to the drug store to stock up on rubbers. He snapped it open and clicked it twice before snapping it back shut.

"It really isn't right to do this without Riley. He deserves to be here."

The others nodded sagely but Spike put it into perspective. "He wouldn't want us to cancel on his account. He knows we are thinking of him and we
are all just relieved that he is going to recover. There will only be one Fourth of July this summer. To skip the bonfire would be sacrilege."

The others all murmured their agreements and Xander flipped open the lighter. He clicked it twice and with a frown, snapped it shut again to the accompanying groans of his friends.

"Now what?"

"Where's Buffy? Shouldn't we wait on her?"

"Um, no. Buff said she had something to do tonight. She promised to try and make it later."

Xander found it astounding that anything on earth should take precedence over this meeting at the cove, but he took Willow at her word and he flipped the lighter open for the third and last time. On the first strike, it lit and he held it to the bottom of the pile of driftwood and cardboard. In a flash, the red flames lit up the night and sent sparks and ash floating up on the force of the constant ocean
Willow stood, feeling its warmth on her face, but it wasn't a happy face. As the flames grew higher, it seemed to ignite a series of questions in her mind that held ugly answers and concerning implications. Suddenly she turned toward Oz, who was staring slackly into the hypnotic fire. "Say, Oz, not that I'm not thrilled to have you join us, but how come you aren't doin' dope with Angel?"

Her question seemed to awaken him from his stupor and he swallowed the last of his beer before pitching the empty bottle into the fire.

"He tossed me out. Said he had a cherry pie delivery tonight and he needed some privacy. Said he was gonna tear that shit up. Fuck, I seen him do it before and it ain't pretty. After he's done, he'll boot her out and I'll run by. No sweat."

Willow ran over and grabbed the front of his Grateful Dead t-shirt and she crumpled it in her fist as she shouted into his face, "Who? Did he say who
he was expecting?"

"Damn, woman. Release the goods. This may be a new band but they are gonna be the shit someday. No, he didn't say who he was waiting on. What the fuck do you care?"

Willow turned and dropped onto her butt in the sand. Even in the darkness, the others could see the look of horror on her face. "It's Buffy. She said that's where she was going. Come on. We've got to go get her."

The others, even Oz who jumped to his feet, took less than a minute to process the information and agree on Willow's assertion that they needed to move quickly. It was an ugly mental picture that sent them fighting the difficulty of running in loose sand as they rounded the bend, went beyond the cave and finally reached the rickety wooden walkway that led toward the marshy part of the coastline.

They immediately fell into a single-file line on the
narrow slats with Xander in the lead. Before they had gone fifty feet, he skidded to a stop as Willow slapped his back and shouted. "Go! Go!"

Xander didn't answer. Instead, he stayed where he was to give his eyes time to sort through the lack of light and identify what he thought he saw. When he was certain, he mumbled a small "Damn," and rushed forward. When he reached the small figure that was stumbling toward him, he held out his strong arms and she fell into them.

When the others realized what was happening, they turned and ran back to the cove. Spike rushed to the car and retrieved a blanket as the girls dug through their beach bags for towels and a warm sweater. As everything was assembled, Xander stepped back into the glow of the huge, crackling fire with the trembling girl in his arms.

Gently he laid her down on the blanket Spike had brought and cautiously Willow crawled over to her. Her hair was wild and disheveled. Her shirt was torn open and all the buttons missing. Her shorts were
on inside out and a small trickle of blood had run down and dried on the inside of her leg, staining her white bobby sox. More blood spotted her nose, and her bottom lip was swollen and bruised. Carefully, Willow brushed the hair from her face.

"Oh, Christ, Buffy. Are you.... What...? Is there anything we can do for you? Can we go get your mother? We need to call the police."

Buffy looked up in pain and terror. The very idea of her mother and the entire town of Sunnydale knowing snapped her from her shock and started the tears flooding down her face. "No! Please. No! I'll be all right. I don't want anyone to know. I'm so ashamed."

Buffy curled up in a small ball and sobbed. Lovingly, Cordelia and Willow wrapped their arms around her. Sometimes there is nothing a friend can do to make a problem go away and the best they can do is to help their friend cry. So they did.

Xander had other ways to deal. His fury burned
higher and hotter than the bonfire that warmed his face, and his expression sent shivers down Spike's spine. He had no idea what Xander was planning but a silent nod told his lover that he was fully on board. In a flash, Xander whipped the shirt off over his head and he wrapped it snugly around the end of a thick, long stick. Following his lead, Spike unbuttoned his and he did the same. By now, he understood.

Together, they touched their torches into the bonfire and lit them like giant matches. Oz slapped his hands to the sides of his head and wailed as even his mary jane soaked brain read the inevitable.

"Noooooo!!"

Xander gave him a stern look that left no room for conversation or compromise. He then marched off as his flaming torch lit the way with Spike just inches behind. Over the dunes and around the cave. Onto the wooden walkway and down the narrow path. At the brisk pace they maintained, it took less than ten minutes to get to the marsh and the area
of the shack in the clearing.

Xander stopped and turned to Spike. "You don't have to be a part of this if you aren't sure. I won't think less of you if you wait here."

As his answer, Spike stepped around Xander and marched toward the shack. The doorway was closed but there was the dim light from an oil lantern glowing from one of the windows. Spike marched straight up to the darkened window and he threw his torch as hard as he could shattering the glass. Xander followed and heaved his in the other side. Within seconds, the dry, wooden walls of the shack went up like kindling. Flames licked out both windows as the front door burst open and the lone occupant charged onto the front yard, screaming and shouting for water.

When he spotted Spike and Xander standing nearby, two and two immediately became four and he knew. Just to make sure there were no misunderstandings, Xander shouted over the roar of the flames, "That's for Buffy. You stay in Sunnydale
and the next time we'll bolt the door before we set it on fire."

It was a chilling threat that Angel did not want to test. *Fuck it,* he thought. He had been thinking about moving on anyway. He just wished he didn't have to do it in his boxers.

When they returned to the cove, Buffy could see the sky over the shack glowing red. A girl couldn't want better friends than this. The girls had cleaned her up and she managed a weak smile of gratitude.

Without comment, Spike and Xander went over and took her by the hands. They pulled her to her feet and together the six of them stood around the bonfire and considered their lives.

One by one, they all smiled.

The summer of 1965 was one none of them would ever forget.
Part Fifty

One Year Later

The sky was a deep, clear blue and although they hadn't had much rain lately, the summer of 1966 would go down on the record books as one of the coolest in recent history. Still, that didn't stop the junior class of Sunnydale High, led by Dawn Summers and her best pal, Andrew Wells, from holding court at the beach and claiming the cove as their personal hangout.

For the graduating seniors, commencement was the culmination of a year that saw tremendous changes for them all. Transformations that began that fateful summer and that forever shifted the sands of who they were and what they were to become.
Changes that set their feet on paths that would continue to question their futures and fates.

When the huge, black Buick pulled up and stopped, Xander reached for the door handle and he paused. He felt like he should say something, but what? His decision, one that had been discussed ad nauseam, was settled and there was no turning back. Still, this was awkward. He wanted one more hug. He wanted the reassurance that he was making the right move.

Slowly, the driver reached over and patted him affectionately on the knee. There were no more words to say. Everything was already understood. Xander was a man now. He didn't need permission or confirmation to live his life.

He smiled and touched the large, calloused hand before pulling on the door handle and climbing out. With a smile and a wave, Xander called out, "See ya soon." and he walked away without looking back. Instead, he focused on the large terminal ahead that was teeming with people and activity and another man who waved his arm high over his head
to catch Xander's attention.

"Xan! Over here!"

Hurrying toward him, Xander threw his arm around his shoulder and squeezed.

"Damn, it's good to see you. I was almost afraid you would back out."

The other man slapped his hand to his chest and pouted.

"Xan, my man, you wound me. We made a pact. Together. You and me, side by side for the next two years. You have my back and I have yours. Besides, my number wasn't that great either and when you got called up, I wouldn't have been far behind. This way, it's our choice and we do it together."

Xander fought back the tears. He was so grateful for his friends. They had never let him down. The day the orders arrived, informing him that he would be spending the next 24 months serving his country,
apple pie, and motherhood, it was a shock. The added news that that service would take place in Viet Nam, terrified him. When Riley stepped up with a casual shrug and said, "Hey, no sweat. We can knock this bitch out together." it was like the surfing competition all over again. Friends. Partners. And now, brothers-in-arms.

"You know I love you, man."

Riley barked out a laugh and hoisted his duffle bag over his shoulder. "Yeah? Well, don't let Spike hear you say that. He'll kick my ass. Come on. We have some time before the train gets in so let's go over to the coffee shop and have a cup of joe."

Xander grinned, grabbed his matching bag and led the way. Although it was crowded with other impatient passengers waiting to begin their journeys, Xander and Riley were able to secure a small table by the window. They settled in and gave the pleasant girl their orders.

"I'm surprised. Wasn't that your dad I saw drop you
off? I thought Spike would have wanted to say good-bye."

Xander stared out the window with a wistful, faraway look in his eyes. "Nah. We said our goodbyes last night. I thought this would be too hard and too public for him. At least he's stopped crying and begging. He's still pissed off at me for passing up all the college offers but that just wasn't me. I'm through with school and I needed to get on with my life. Uncle Sam thought that was a good decision too. Still, I thought maybe Spike would come by and...oh well, it's better that he doesn't. What about you? Did you and Cordelia say goodbye last night?"

Xander waggled his eyebrows suggestively and Riley had to laugh.

"Yeah, we did. Several times as a matter of fact. She also threatened to castrate me if I let anything happen that would delay our wedding when this army stint is over. Have you ever seen that humongous stack of Bride magazines she has under
her bed?"

Xander barked out a laugh as he remembered all the times he was forced to 'ooo' and 'ah' over the latest gowns from Paris.
"Yeah, the girl is serious about her wedding plans. I still can't get over the two of you getting together like that. But, like Spike says, when you think about it, you guys are the perfect fit."

Riley nodded as he remembered the circumstances that opened their eyes and brought them closer together and he shook his head in disbelief at his luck.

"Cordy's a lot of things, but she is a hell of a woman. When I got that concussion, she came to the hospital and stayed with me all night. After that, she sat by me at home, read to me, joked with me and I guess I saw a side of her I had never noticed. I used to think I was jealous of you and her together, but now when I look back, I was just jealous of you. I can see that now. Speaking of getting married, do you ever feel resentful that you and Spike can never
It was a question that Xander had mulled over a million times and finally came to the conclusion that some things just are what they are.

"No. I mean, yeah, it would be great but it's impossible and truth is, it isn't all that important. If we can just live together and make a life for ourselves, that's as good as it gets. Some people never find that one special person to love and we did. Society can stop us from getting married, but they can't stop us from being in love. When it's right, it's right. Just like you and Cordy."

Riley had to agree. "You are a wise man, my friend. Just like me and Cordy. I think I always knew in my heart that it wasn't going to work for me and Buff. And like they say, sometimes you have to thank God for unanswered prayers."

At the mention of Buffy's name, Xander's eyes dropped. After that fateful night she had never been the same. She had grown quiet and
withdrawn. When her mother finally found out what happened, Joyce had taken Buffy to a counselor, but they all knew that Angel had taken something away from her that she would never get back.

"It seems weird that Buff chose a college clear out in Colorado. Don't they have snow and cold weather and shit? I mean, really, how do you work on a tan when you're asshole deep in a snow drift?"

Riley chuckled at the image of Buffy in her bikini in the icy tundra. Then, the smile fell from his face. "I think she wanted a fresh start as far from Sunnydale as possible. It's crazy, Xan. I thought our gang would be together forever. Now, here we are just one year later and the only ones who will still be in town are Spike and Cordy. At least they have each other to lean on. Who'da thought they would get so close? Hey, speaking of distant friends, have you heard from Willow and Oz?"

The waitress brought over their coffee and set down the cups. When Xander handed her a dollar,
she held up her hand in refusal.

"No need, hon. Coffee's free for you guys in uniform. Ya'll take care now." And she walked away.

Xander's eyebrows rose and he held his cup up in a toast to his buddy. Riley clinked his mug to Xander's and they sipped the hot, bitter drink. When he set his cup down, Xander nodded his head as he thought.

"Yeah, Willow called from a pay phone sometime last week. She said that her and Oz and Tara had crossed the border into Canada and that they had news of a place in Toronto where they could go. She called it a commune and said a bunch of other people who were opposed to the draft were all living there together. She said it took them nearly two weeks of hitchhiking and walking to get to the border. She said they were becoming hippies, whatever the hell that is."

Riley screwed his face up in disgust and confusion. "Hippies my ass. Oz is a draft dodger plain and
Xander just shrugged. He was beyond judgment and recrimination. He learned long ago that every man chooses his own path, and all he could do was worry about himself. "I guess. All I know is, that's a long way to go with no money and no plans. I hope they're all right and I hope when this damn war is over they can come home. It seems wrong to arrest Oz for not wanting to go to the army but Angel is free to live down in Florida after what he did here."

Riley scratched his fingers through the stubble of his recently buzzed-off hair and he snorted. "Face it, Xan. The world is a fucked-up place right now. Luckily there are guys like us who are willing to fight the Commies and drive back the Red tide making life safe for puppies and virgins everywhere."

Xander howled with laughter just as something out the window caught his eye. "Hey, the train is pulling in. Come on. We better get to the platform."

Together, the fast friends rose and heaved the
duffle bags over their shoulders. They then proceeded toward the end of a long line as the train chugged in and whooshed to a stop. One by one, the passengers stepped up, showed their tickets and stepped on board.

"Xan, hey, look."

Xander felt Riley tap his arm, and his eyes searched in the direction his partner pointed. That's when he saw him. A small figure of a short blond man leaning against the driver's door of a wood-sided station wagon.

Without taking his focus off the distant sight, Xander advanced, step by step toward the ticket taker until it was finally his turn to climb on the train.

"Ticket?"

Xander gave no answer.

"Son? You have a ticket?"
Riley reached around his friend and pulled the paper from Xander's pocket. He handed it to the ticket master to punch, then he gave him his own. When there was nothing left to do, Xander smiled brightly and lifted his hand in farewell. It was a gesture copied by the man by the car just as Xander disappeared inside.

Spike stood where he was for the next half hour. Twenty minutes beyond when Xander climbed on board, and five minutes past the time the train had left the station. He had watched until there was nothing left to see, and still he stood by.

Finally, with a deep sigh, he walked around to the driver's side of the car, he got in and he drove home.

The End
Letters Home

Rating: R for language.
Disclaimer: The Bee owns nothing including the characters and products mentioned in this story.
Genre: HAU. Drama
This story is unbetaed. If you wish to point out boo boo's, that's fine.
Warnings: Mentions of war and death and all the bad things that come with war.
Summary: Letters Home is a series of very short letters between Spike and Xander in the two years they are apart. It takes the boys of HANG TEN to the men of ECHOS OF A BAMBOO FLUTE.
August 3rd. 1966

Dear S.,

I only have a few minutes. We are all packed together like sardines in this terminal waiting to get on the aircraft carrier that will take us on the first leg of our journey to Nam. It is going to be a long trip but everybody is excited to go.

Sargent Gilmore has already served two tours of duty over there and he has been trying to give us some pointers. He is hard-nosed and firm but he is fair and I think he is looking out for us. He says it isn't as bad as the newspapers say.

He says when we get there, we are setting up in a safe zone far from the fighting.

Most of the other guys in our company are cool, but you were right, they do not agree with some things
we believe in. If you know what I mean. So, even if I don't use your name in my letters, always know that it is on my lips when I pray at night.

Don't worry about me. We will get through this. Time will fly and before you know it, we will be together again.

After we get there and get settled, Sarge says we can write home and give our families an address to send letters and care packages to.

Oh, he is yelling at us to line up. I gotta run.

I love you!!

Xan
August 23, 1966

Dear S.,

Hi, honey. Gee, I sure do miss you. Sorry I haven't written sooner but things have been just crazy! The flight over took two days of nearly nonstop travel. When we finally landed, we were all exhausted but there was still a lot of work to do and almost a week before we could really sleep.

It is like a whole different world here and I don't mean that in a good way. If you thought California was hot, damn! This is hot poured over hot biscuits. The air is thick and wet and it feels like you are breathing in a sauna. Even the nights are so swampy that you can't sleep.

And don't get me started on the bugs! Geesh!! I swear I saw a roach so huge, it was standing flat-footed and fucking a goat!

The trip was nearly 36 hours and the only sleep we
got was an hour or two at a time, sitting up, dressed in full gear. Everybody was pissy, mean, and stunk like sweaty gym socks and jock straps. Yeah, I did too. This is beyond anything deodorant is gonna solve.

When they started assigning jobs, Riley got called up first. Because of his background in his family's garage, he got a titties gig working on jeeps in the motorpool. By the time they went down the line, he had taught me enough engine-speak to bullshit my way in with him.

Riley is a Godsend. I don't think I could do this without him!

The only time we will be on the front lines is when we have to go out into the jungle to pick up a disabled piece of machinery. I guess the jeeps break down a lot from the foliage and the humidity fucking with the motors. There aren't a whole lot of good roads over here but the villagers don't need them. They do most of their business with ox and carts.
So, for now, our company is stationed near the DMZ and we are working as a supply station. Sarge says we shouldn't get to comfortable though cause shit changes.

The paper I am sending with this letter is my address where you can write to me. Even though we only get a mail drop once a week, I wouldn't be mad if there was more than one letter from you.

Oh, and Mom wanted me to tell you that you better not be a stranger. She has gotten used to you being around the house and I think she expects you to come over and still bake cookies and talk soap operas with her. Dad would miss you too. I know, I know, but that is just the way he is. He acts like a jerk but he really does like you.

Let's face it, even though we never had "the talk" with them, they both think of you as their son-in-law. I wish we had. You know. Told them.

OK, so much for now. Write to me and tell me everything!!
I miss you.

I love you,

Xan

September 1, 1966

Dear Xan,

Bloody hell! I was bonkers not hearing from you! I had imagined all sorts of things. Da said I have to learn patience because there will be times while you are there that you will be unable to write and it is only because you have a very hard job to do.

As you know, patience is not my strongest suit but I will try.
In the mean time, I intend to bore you with all the latest facts (gossip) that's brewing and bubbling in the Peyton Place called Sunnydale.

First, I begin my classes at the university tomorrow. I am glad I decided not to go away to school. It gives me a great deal of comfort to be here near our beach and stomping grounds. I am taking my beginners courses and do not have to pick a major for a couple years. By then I hoped you and I could make the decision together.

Buffy left yesterday for Colorado. It will seem strange with her not here. Cordy and I took her to the mall over the week-end for some last minute shopping to get sweaters, warm trousers and a heavy jacket.

Cordy ask Buffy if she could have her gold, sparkly peddle pushers since she can't wear them in the snow and Buff told her they wouldn't fit over her big ass! It was great. Half the mall could hear Cordy scream. It was just like old times.
Da is still spending a LOT of time next door with Jenny. I wouldn't be surprised if Santa Clause didn't bring a ring and a question for Christmas this year. I wouldn't mind, not really. She is very nice and she has made Da very happy.

I have given thought to your weekly letter delivery situation and here is what I think we should do. I am going to write to you every day. If there is no news and nothing to say, I will just tell you that I love you. I will write the number of the letter on the back of the envelope. When you get seven of them at a time, you can only open one each day according to their order. By the time you read the last, the next batch should arrive.

Yes, I know. You are in love with a genius.

Write me when you can and tell Riley I said hello.

I love you,

S.
Dear Xan,

I LOVE YOU!!

S.

September 16, 1966

My sweet, genius, S.

You are truly brilliant. There is only one problem with your plan, when I get a whole stack of letters...
from you, all I want to do is open them all at once. I am not as patient as you and I can't wait for fear something will happen and I will miss one line that you wrote.

A lot of the guys here never get any mail. They are jealous and say I am lucky to have such a loyal girlfriend. I just smile and say that yes, I am very lucky and the person I love is wonderful!!

The last few days here have been boring! We can always hear the distant sound of bombs and gunfire but lately, we are just on standby which means we load on all of our gear then sit around and do nothing. I think my left shoulder is going to be permanently drooped from carrying my rifle over it. The worst part of the long hours of waiting is the time it gives you to think.

I'm homesick.

I know that sounds childish and silly but sometimes it is so gut wrenching that I can't fight back the tears. I miss you. I miss my home and my Mom.
Even in the swampy heat of the night, my arms feel cold and empty without you. I don't know if I can do this. I hate this place.

Ok, enough whining.

I can't write anymore now,

I love you,

Xan

October 3, 1966

My darling Xan,

I cried when I read your last letter and part of me wanted to write hearts and flowers but I know you. That will only make you more depressed. Instead, I
will take the opposite road and write only cheerful, happy things.

Cordelia and I went to the movies last night. We saw Arabesque with Gregory Peck, who is just scrumptious, and Sophia Loren who looks good too because she has those big, round tits. Cordy says when Miss Loren gets older those tits will sag to her knees. Cordy says she would never want tits like that. I think Cordy would kill for tits like that.

All the way home, Cordy kept talking about someday going to L.A. to become a famous actress. She says Riley can be her manager but they will have to keep their marriage a secret because her fans will be more enamored of her if they think she is available. Cordy can be weird sometimes. If we could get married, I wouldn't keep it hidden from anyone. I would shout it from the tree tops! We would wear matching wedding rings!

Maybe we could wears rings anyway?

Oh, guess what? I got a letter from Willow! She said
they are living on a farm outside a small town east of Toronto. They are in a commune with 12 other people. They have a cow, a goat and they sell the vegetables they will grow in their garden. Oh, and get this. Her and Tara AND Oz all sleep together in one big bed! It is shocking with a small measure of squick.

It is also intriguing and I admit, I wouldn't mind being a fly on the wall.

I saw Buffy's mom at the market. She said Buff is doing good in school. I think she is coming home next month for Thanksgiving.

My classes are nothing exciting. I am still in the basic beginners business courses and struggling with that damn chemistry class. I have to pass both of these just to be where I need to in order to start my freshman credits. Sometimes I think about just chucking it all but I really want to get a degree so when you come home, I can be in a career that will afford us a house of our own.
After school and on the week-ends, I spend as much time with your parents as I do my Da. Your mom and I are planning a special care package to send you on Thanksgiving and another one for Christmas. No! I will not tell you what! Gee, you can be very pushy sometimes.

Nobody likes a pushy bottom, Xan!!

Ok, yes I do.

But I like a dom top better. Oh, now see what you've done? Gotta go. There's something that needs my immediate attention.

Take care of yourself.

I love you,

S.
October 6th, 1966

Hi Honey,

Just a few lines. I am sitting at my desk in my room and I am supposed to be doing homework. You know I have your picture propped up here smiling at me and how on earth can I concentrate on the table of elements when your eyes are watching me. Your beautiful, deep, brown eyes. I love your eyes.

I love you. I miss you.

The evening news shows terrible things going on over there. Villages burning, bombs dropping and soldiers........

Please take care of yourself.

I have a large calendar hanging on the back of my bedroom door. Each day I put a big, black 'X' over the day and I am counting them till you come home again.
I love you,
S.

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October 8th, 1966

My darling S.,

What's going on here? Hmm. Let me think. Well, the food is terrible! When we are on base the cook fixes some sort of slop that he shovels onto our trays. If it is green, I think it is mostly vegetable. When it is brown, I pray that means meat. When we are out in the jungle for days at a time, we take MRE's with us. Those are small boxed meals that actually aren't that bad.

We had a shake up on base last week. We have a lot of locals that come on base to do cleaning and civilian jobs. They brought helpers with them and before you knew it, we had more Vietnamese on
base than soldiers. We also have night vision cameras set up on the perimeter and when the officers got to checking, they realized that the same villagers that were coming on base during the day were the ones who were shooting at us from the jungle around their villages at night.

After that, they put all sorts of checks in place and now only certain old men and women can work here and they have to have papers and clearance.

These locals are so strange! Our company had a dog that had wandered in and we adopted it. It was so cute! Brown and shaggy. We named it Tags. Get it? Dog tags? Anyway, we fed it scraps and it got fat and happy. I loved that dog. One day it just disappeared. We found out later that the villagers ate it. Worse than that. They had brought it in knowing we would fatten it up.

I can't be mad. Hunger makes you do ugly things. Can this really be the same planet as Sunnydale?

More later,
October 10th, 1966

Hi Baby,

There isn't much going on here right now so I thought I should take some time to spruce up the wagon.

Have I ever told you how much I appreciate your giving me your woody? It is so beautiful! So long and low. It is silly and old-fashioned but when I run my hands down over her sides and around to her trunk, I know that there is no other woody in the world that I ever want to drive or even ride.

I know it took a real leap of faith to place it in my hands for safe keeping and I don't want you to think I ever take that lightly. In fact, I ran down to Sam's
garage today and picked up some car wash for her.

Our girl is dirty and needs a nice long bath.

The sun is hot so I stripped down to my shorts, the ones that are much too short to wear in public, and I got a big bucket of warm, sudsy water and a large squishy sponge.

First, I wet her down with a fast squirt of cold water from the hose, just to let her know what was coming. Then I dipped my big sponge in the bucket and I slapped it down on the hood. It was so hot from the sun that it nearly sizzled and burned my hand till the water cooled her off.

And I began to rub.

I leaned way over and I pressed my chest down on her heated metal as I slathered the slick, slippery bubbles all over her. The warmth felt amazing on my bare skin. I strained and reached as far as I could to find every hidden spot even though I was already getting my pants wet. Of course bending over that
far made my butt cheeks show from the legs of my shorts.

Then I stopped and hosed her all off from the windshield to the headlights.

After I finished the front, I started on the best part. The hard, wooden slats that run along the sides. Oh, fuck, they are wonderful! I want to rub and stroke them till the soap is whipped into a thick foamy lather that spills over my hands and drips onto the ground. There is so much of it running onto the grass that it is oozing between my bare toes.

I want to throw all my arm strength into working to make her shine. Even if my hand gets tired, I promise not to stop until the job is done.

Darn, I just noticed that I bumped the car again and now the front of my shorts are all white and messy. When I get done, I will need a bath too.

When the sides were done, I headed for her rear. I was tempted to open her up and climb in her trunk. I
love it in there but now is not the time. I have played long enough and I needed to finish her off right and proper.

So I went to work on her back-side. I remembered that you always take time to wet it before you start so I did that too. A bit of spit shine. Then I worked her ass over and I didn't stop until she was done. To cap her off I doused her and rinsed all the crusty, nasty foam that was still stuck on her. Finished and fine as a frog's fur.

She looks so happy.

Tomorrow, I may go buy some wax.

Love you,

S.
October 30th

My darling S.,

HOLY SHIT, BABY!!

I nearly passed out when I read your last letter! That was exactly what I needed and I have read it so often that it is all dog-eared and faded. O.k, yeah, it is a bit spotted and smeared too.

You know me so well, it's kinda scary. But scary in a good way.

That letter went a loooong way towards lifting my spirits, as well as other things.

I love you!

I love you!

I love you!!

Hey, you might not hear from me for a few weeks.
Sarge told us this morning that our Division is set to cut a trail through the jungle and that we will be out in the field until it is done. Don't worry, I will be fine. It is routine. Keep writing! Once we are settled, your letters will catch up to me.

Always yours,

Xan

P.S. Tell Cordy to write to Riley. He hasn't gotten a letter in some time and he is worried that something is wrong.

Nov. 28th, 1966

Dearest Xan,

It has been nearly a month since I have gotten a letter and I can't help but worry. Still, I will do as
you asked and continue to write. When you finally get these letters, it will take you days to read them all.

Yesterday was amazing!! It was, of course, Thanksgiving. I was aware that the approach of the holiday was not something that your mom was looking forward to and I wondered what would help. When I talked to Jenny and Da, they said I should invite your folks over for turkey dinner.

It was excellent fun. I turned the parades on the telly and they had a new Mighty Mouse balloon. Don't you wonder if he has a big mouse dick? Maybe that is why that girl mouse that he always saves sings so high pitched.

Anyway, Jenny fixed a turkey and a lot of sides. Your mom brought pies and ice cream. Cherry, because it's your favorite. And yes, your dad was sober. He hasn't been drinking as much since......well, since last summer.

So, at noon, we all sat around the big diningroom
table and held hands. Then we all said a prayer for you. For God to keep you safe and send you home to us soon. To end this terrible war and to finally bring peace to the world.

When I count my blessings, Xan, there is only you.

And then we ate! By the time we were done, I feared my pants would split. When you return you will be shocked to find a very fat lover waddling towards you on the train station. I will need you to work of all those extra pounds I have picked up.

Your parents stayed most of the day and it was very nice. When they left, your mom kissed me on the cheek and ask me if I would call them mom and dad since they thought of me as their son-in-law. I said I would like that very much. Even your dad gave me a fast bear hug. He is funny when he is trapped in an emotional situation.

The day ended with one last surprise. Da and Jenny have been talking marriage for over a year but you know that the memory of my mother kept him from
taking the big step. Well, now, he seems to be ready. He says life is too short to waste. When he and Jenny were out on the porch swing, he gave her a ring.

The silly old goose actually got down on one knee! Jenny cried. It was so romantic that I cried too! They plan to be married at Christmas. Isn't it wonderful? I wish you could be here for the wedding. I promise to tell you all about it.

Take care my sweet. I love you,

S.

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December 15th, 1966

My darling S.,

The last couple months have been rough but we are
finally settled into a camp, although a temporary one. We have spent 16 hours a day hiking and slashing through the heavy underbrush for the last 7 weeks. Making things worse is that it is the rainy season here and it is non-stop, drenching downpours. Our feet are never dry and now we all have some sort of ugly foot fungus that makes walking painful and stinky.

On the bad nights, we huddle up and doze in the rain. On the good nights, we come into one of the small villages and the people who live there are usually nice enough to let us bunk in the thatch roofed lean-to's that house their animals. It sounds bad, but believe me, it is heaven compared to laying your head down in a muddy ditch.

I have never seen anything like it. These people are skin and bone. They have nothing beyond the meager existence that they are able to scratch out on their lands and yet they are so warm and kind to us. You would think they would hate us. We have come here and intruded on a private civil war and our presence has made it a hundred times worse.
But they offer us whatever they have. If they only have one cup of rice, they offer us half.

It makes me think back on all the food and things I have thoughtlessly wasted over the years and I am very ashamed.

Your letters finally caught up with me but I have been too tired to read them. If I can just get a little sleep, I promise to read every word.

I love you and miss you. You seem so far away.

Yours always,

December 15th 1966,

My darling Xan,
Hooray!! I got your letter yesterday! We were all so relieved! I ran over to see Mom after class and she was tickled because she got one too. You sound so different but like Mom says, there is no way for us to understand what you are going through. We will have a lot to talk about when you get home.

So, remember I promised you a surprise? Well, this is it. Mom and I started a month ago drawing up what can only be described as blueprints for the construction of this huge Christmas box. They promised us that if we sent it now, you would get it by, or just after the holiday.

We made fudge, candy, cookies and little paper snow flakes. Everyone I could find from our high school class signed the card and believe it or not, the pictures were Dad's idea. He said if we sent pictures of him and Mom as well as ones of all of us together, then we might also slip in one of just me and it would not look odd. I hope you like it.

Da and Jenny are all twittery. Christmas Eve is set for their wedding. It will be a small affair. Evening.
Candlelight. They are using the chapel at the university and there will be about 50 friends and family. Jenny and I picked her out a lovely dress although according to Cordy’s standards, I don't believe it should have been white. At least not from the sounds I have heard. AAAHHH!!!

They have decided to sell her place and she will move in here. I'm glad. This house is home and I really didn't want to move. Speaking of home, sometimes when I go over to your house to see Mom and Dad, I stay over and sleep in your bed. It is very comforting. I think it is comforting for them too.

I told Cordy to write more often and she said she would. If Riley is worried that she is seeing someone else, tell him to chill. She isn't. She is focused right now on this hope of acting. She has signed up at the university for theatre classes and spends all her time drenched in drama.

I won't natter on.
I am so glad you are all right!

I LOVE YOU,

S.

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Jan 3, 1967

My darling S.,

I got the box about a week after Christmas. It was a wonderful surprise. The card was fun. When I read some of the names, I could hardly remember their faces. Time is strange over here. The days drag at a snails pace but when you look back on them, they have gone by in a blink.

I still don't like it and I can't wait to come home, but it doesn't feel as strange and foreign as it did at first. I am learning a little bit of Vietnamese from some of the locals who come onto the base and I
like them. They are quiet, humble, and they have such a sense of inner peace despite their living conditions.

There is a large family that lives a couple miles from the base. Grandparents, parents and five children. Three of their own and two that they took in when their own parents were killed in a village bombing. A lot of times, when I am off duty, I walk there and take them some leftovers from the mess hall. They have so little and we waste so much.

They are wonderfully kind and they treat me like family. One of the girls is about Dawn's age and reminds me of her. Not in looks, but in the way she moves and smiles. I pay her a dollar a week and she does my laundry. It is a fortune to them and helps buy feed for the goats. Her father shares his tobacco with me. Yeah, I have started smoking. Bad habit but I can quit later.

I know you won't mind that I gave the box of Christmas treats to them. No one had ever had such rich treats and they wanted to save them but I told
them that they would not keep for long. Mamma Tai made some tea and I drank it and watched as the children marveled over the strange sweet cookies.

All I really needed from the box was the picture.

When I was back on the base and alone, I stared at it. I had forgotten. Your eyes are so blue. Your hair is so blond. And you look so happy. So light and carefree. You are a world and a lifetime away from me and I wonder if I will ever touch your face again. I put your picture inside my helmet so it is always with me.

Sarge says that now it is 1967. A new year has come and the war drags on. Maybe next year, I will be there to celebrate with you.

I love you,

Xan
January 20th, 1967

Dearest Xan,

I am very glad that you have found a family there that has made you feel welcome. At first, I admit, I was a bit hurt that you gave away all of the things that Mom and I made for you. When Mom caught me pouting about it, she scolded me and told me that we should be grateful and send out prays of love to the strangers who have taken you in and given you the affection and acceptance that, right now, we can't.

She is right and I'm sorry. You just sound so different in your letters and it scares me. When you get home, I want us to pick up where we left off and everything would go back to exactly how it was, but I don't think it can. I am still the same person but you are not.
You are in a situation that is inconceivable to me. You have to adapt to intolerable situations and you have seen terrible things. The worst thing I face is a difficult math test and maybe a splinter in my thumb. Will you still want someone who is as young and silly as me?

Please forgive me for sounding like a whiny, needy, Cordy. Talk to me Xan.

Always yours. Always faithful.

S.

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February 12, 1967

My young and silly S.,

Will I still want you? Hmm. Interesting question. Will I still want to breathe? Will my heart still want
to beat? You really are silly if you think I want anything in this fucked up world more than the chance to come home to you. I dream about you every night and when the days get too hard, I take off my helmet and I look at your smiling face. It gives me the strength to go on.

I think being here must be much the same as it is for people in prison. You are stuck here while the world of your friends and family goes on without you. If you sit and dwell on it, it can drive you crazy. Accepting it and making a life here is the only way to survive and keep from exploding. Some of the guys have adapted well. Too well. They enjoy the killing. The war has set their inhabitions free and they.......

But that is not me. Will things go back to exactly the way they were for us? No. I can't be the same stupid kid that I was, but I am still yours. If you can accept me and still love me for who I have become, we can still have a life together.

Always yours. Always faithful,
February 28, 1967

My darling Xan,

I have wonderful news! I got a letter from Willow yesterday. She really wrote it to both of us so I am enclosing it with mine. I wish I could see your face when you read it. I just know you will do that funny thing where your eyes bug and your mouth hangs open. At first I couldn't decide if it was good or not, but how can it be bad? It's Willow. Our Willow. READ THE LETTER AND WRITE TO ME!!

I love you,

S.
My dearest Xander and Spike,

I know this letter is a long time coming, but I suppose guilt has caused its delay. I have wanted, for a long time to explain but I could never find the right words. How is it possible that the world has gone from a simple, easy place to this fucked up planet of war and hate?

I never really understood how things could be until our senior year when I started to spend time with Tara. She is a true flower child. She is peace and love and the more she talked to me about how people just like us can change the world, the more I wanted to be part of that movement. How? By living the example.

We have chosen a life of simplicity. We eat no meat. We share everything and own nothing. We
have moved into an abandoned farmhouse that has no electricity or running water but we make do.

Our commune is not huge. Right now there are 13 people here. Some come and some go. Over the summer we raised our own vegetables and canned them. Right now, it is deep winter so we cut firewood to stay warm and we tend to our animals. We have chickens to sell eggs and we keep two goats for the milk. Tara and Peggy make baskets to sell on the streets and Michael is an amazing artist. The hardware store in the next town lets him hang his paintings in the back. He has already sold two! We think he is going to be wonderfully famous.

And Oz. Oz worried that you would hate him because you and Riley went to the war while he chose the path of peace and harmony. We have explained to him that you would never hold that against him. We have all been friends too long. Oz's gentle soul could not have remained so innocent if he were subjected to the horrors of a conflict that slaughters babies and mothers in their beds. Not that we think you would do that!
Anyway, Oz has become quite a farmer. During the planting season he grows hemp for sale. It is not legalized but the people here are much more enlightened. In the winter, he dries his stock pile and makes a bit of money from it.

In all, our lives are very simple. We live off the land and require only love to keep us together as a large extended family.

Speaking of families, that is the real reason I am writing. Oz has talents that go far beyond growing and smoking marijuana. WE'RE PREGNANT! Isn't it exciting? Tara and I are both going to have babies! She is due about a month before me. Our babies can grow up together and live free. They will never know the restrictions of a fucked up society. Their world will be bare feet and running naked in the tall grass.

Tara and I will both be mother to each child and our babies will grow in the arms of love. We also pray that someday the whole word will reach the same
enlightenment that we have.

When that happens, we will come home. We will share in your love and you can be uncles to our children. Till then, we will keep you in our hearts.

Peace and Love,

Your Willow.

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March 10th, 1967

Dear S.,

Are you fucking kidding me? So, I am supposed to be thrilled that Willow and Tara and Oz are living a life of an ongoing party while criticizing me and calling me a baby killer? Does she think I am here by choice? Does she think I would rather be here instead of home, holding you in my arms and living
my life, free to make choices and decisions for myself the same way she has?

That is fucking bullshit!

Am I mad at Oz? fuckin'-A I am! How dare she act like he is better than me because he decided to run away and spend his days smoking dope and screwing two women at once while I lay in the mud and bugs and death of the swamp and jungle praying that I can stay alive just one more day.

And now she is pregnant. That's great. There are not nearly enough babies born everyday in this world. I see them everyday living exactly like she describes. Naked, hungry, starving and hanging on mothers who are trying to scratch out a living from a decimated plot of earth.

I'm sorry, baby. Maybe Willow's news caught me on a bad day. I guess I am really glad she and Tara are all right.

I'm just tired.
I love you,
Xan

March 24th, 1967

Darling Xan,

There is no way we can understand how things are for you. All we can do is pray for you and hold you in our hearts until we can hold you in our arms. Please forgive us all for our thoughtlessness when we say or do something that may seem trivial.

On the other hand, don't let this time in your life define who you are. You are still my Xander! You are stronger than this and this will not break you!!

You need to start thinking about our future. By the
time you get home, I will have a place for us. I have been looking at small flats and I have been saving money from my parttime job at the college library. You will get a small amount from the army and it should be enough for us to get some furniture and settle in.

I can't wait! It will be wonderful!!

Write to me, Xan. Tell me you love me. Tell me what color we will paint the walls and if we will get a dog and what side of the bed you will sleep on.

Talk to me,
I love you,

S.

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April 30, 1967
Darling S.,

Sorry I haven't written lately. We have been very busy and things here are strange. Do you remember me telling you about the family that lives near the base? I often went there and took them food and supplies. They treated me like a son.

Two days ago I went there and the house was abandoned. They were gone. There was no sign of them. The family, the ox and the goats had just disappeared into the jungle. I don't know why they left and the last time I was there, they didn't say anything to me about leaving.

Also, Sarge says we are moving our position. There is a bridge and a water tower several miles from here. It is close to the line of fire and it has been bombed twice. We are going to be stationed near there to rebuild and then protect them.

It is also close to a town near Siagon. There are bars and clubs there. I have been there a few times with some of the other guys when we get leave and it
helps to just get drunk and cut loose. The music is loud and the beer is cheap. Maybe I'm more like Dad than I thought. There are also a lot of prostitutes in the bars and on the streets but Riley and I only pay them to dance.

With the move coming, I probably won't have time to write but I will when I can. I know you are busy too. Didn't you say you were going to school? Anyway, don't feel like you have to continue to write everyday.

Gotta go,
Love,
Xander

May 8th, 1967

My darling Xander,
Where are you? And don't you dare say Viet Nam because you know what I mean. I spoke to someone here at the university and he says you are suffering from what he called the detachment of war. You are so far from home that you are forgetting that this is your life and reality and that is just a temporary situation.

It scares me but he says that when you tell me not to write, that is the worst thing I could do. I intend to write more!!! I intend to keep your focus on all the little details that you think are not important. Such as:

The Chatterbox has a new sandwich on the menu. It is called the Batman because there is a TV show called that. It is a big burger wrapped in black paper called a cave. You would like the show. I am sure that Batman and his sidekick Robin are fucking their brains out while Alfred watches.

Also, I had to put a new alternator and fanbelt in the woody. She runs like new and purrs like a kitten. She misses you too.
Oh, I know how you feel about babies, but this one will blow your mind. Da and Jenny are expecting!! Can you believe it? I am finally going to be a big brother! Da has all but worn out his glasses by polishing them and Jenny is just glowing. I am thrilled for them and so are you, you just don't realize it yet.

She is due in the fall. Sept. 23rd., the doctor says. I am going to stay here and help until the baby is a couple months old, but then it really will be time for me to find a place of our own. They need the chance to be a family and so do we.

It sounds like things are up in the air for you but I'm sure you can find a minute or two to write. Please?

Prostitutes? Gee, I really don't like the sound of that. As for Dad, he hardly ever drinks anymore. Hasn't since you have been gone. Mom has missed hearing from you too.
Stay strong, Xan. We all love you very much.

Yours always,

S.

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May 25th, 1967

Darling Xan,

I guess things are still in transit for you. There isn't much new here. School is done for the semester and I passed all my final exams with flying colors. I was hoping to get some input from you but Mom has been helping me to decide on a major for my degree. I think I will study American History and secondary education. Yep, I will be one of those nerdy teachers in high school that we used to laugh at. What do you think?
The evening news says that things over there are getting much worse and I worry about your safety.

Please, Xander, write to me.

I love you,

S.

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June 5, 1967

Darling Xan,

I love you.

Yours always,

S.
June, 10th 1967

Dear S.,

I told you not to worry if you don't always hear from me. When we get breaks we spend a lot of time in these small cities. By day they are hustle and bustle trying to look like it is business as usual despite the military presence and the bombed buildings and families who have all lost sons and fathers.

At night, they are something else all together. The drugs and prostitution are everywhere. The small shacks where they do business reminds me of Angel's place. The whores are not always what they seem. Some of the most beautiful girls are not. If you know what I mean.

The guys on base that use them call them 'shims'. Back home, they would die before they would touch
someone like that but the lines between good and bad and right and wrong are blurred here. It's easy to excuse your behavior by simply telling yourself that this is not reality.

They give us all the alcohol we want for free and we just hang out in the shacks and huts. Chad, one of the other Privates, has a guitar and he plays music and we dance with the shims till the sun comes up and we have to get back to the war.

We were stumbling back to the tents the other night when a rat the size of a fucking cat jumped out at us. Riley screamed and shot its head off. I laughed so hard I thought I would piss myself.

O.k, I gotta get some sleep before my next watch.

Xan

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June 18th, 1967

My darling Xander,

There are no blurred lines here. My world is all about waiting on you to come home. I talked to Buffy yesterday and she said Dawn and her friends were starting to collect drift wood and crap to stack up for the fourth of July bonfire. Their group has about ten and, just like us, they own the cove. Do you remember when that was us?

It was a time that changed our lives. It was the best but believe me, there are better times to come.

I went to the ocean last night at sunset. The waves were huge and there were several boys out on their boards. I looked up as the moon came out and I wondered if you were looking up too. It is the same moon that lights your path through the jungle.

It made me feel closer to you.

Stay safe.
I love you,
S.

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My Darling Xan,

Mom and I haven't heard from you in a while. President Johnson gave an address to the nation on the news last night since it was the fourth of July. He said that this war is necessary to save us all from the spread of Communism that would take over the world and enslave us all. I'm not sure I believe that. Dad says that Johnson is a prick that is only in office because the CIA killed Kennedy. He says that Bobby Kennedy is going to be elected president and he will end the war once and for all.

I don't know how I feel about you spending time
with girly boys who want money for 'dancing' but I am not there and I won't judge what you do.

There was a small group of students on the university campus that held a protest of the war. They made signs and they stood outside the Dean's administration building. I should have joined them but I thought it may seem like I was protesting against you and I am not.

I guess I was wrong. Some lines are blurred here too.

Take care.

I love you,
S.

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August 1st., 1967
Darling Xan,

What's happening? Are you safe?

I love you!!!

S.

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September 3rd., 1967

My darling Spike,

Are you still mine? I have been lost and forgotten what is important. Sometimes I look in a mirror and I don't know who I am. I have done terrible things. Things you will hate me for. Things I don't understand.
All hell has broken out here and it is just unimaginable. We are close to the border and dodging bullets everywhere we go. The tower we rebuilt is a target for the Cong and we work in shifts to guard it even as their grenades land around us trying to take it out.

It is impossible to sleep at night with the constant sound of gunfire and helicopters overhead. Because we are in the jungle, we are getting snakebit and dodging rats the size of dogs. I think the gooks use them as weapons.

We have orders to burn the villages and smoke out the shooters.

Two men from our company have died from sniper fire. Chad was one of them. He was running right beside me one minute then the top of his head was gone the next. All this can't be real. It has to be a nightmare.

I can't believe it has been more than a year since I
came here. A year without you. In some ways it seems like just yesterday that we swam together in the ocean and made love in the cove. On other days, I can't even remember what you look like or how your voice sounds. Did you know that I had forgotten that you have that silly accent?

Your picture crumbled and disintegrated inside my helmet and I cried the morning I looked at it and realized it was gone. I am trying to recall your face but I can't.

I watch as some of the other guys get Dear John letters from home and I wonder if I will be next. I have been an ass. Do you still love me? Are you fed up? Have you moved on with your life? I wouldn't blame you if you did but please, do me one last favor.

Please lie to me. Tell me what I need to hear. Tell me you still wait for me. It is all I have. It is what I am hanging on for.

I can't promise to write more often because all we
do is patrol and fight. We are lucky if supply deliveries get to us more than once a month and we live on rice just like the locals. I was sick with a fever and, although it is better, I still can't keep much food down. I have lost a lot of weight but as long as I can still hold a rifle, I can hold my own.

I love you Spike. You are the man I love and there will never be anyone else. I am not ashamed of that. I am not ashamed of you. I am not ashamed of us.

I don't know when I will get the chance to mail this letter and I'm not sure if you will ever get it but if you do, it comes with my heart.

I love you,

Xan

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November 17th, 1967
My wonderful, darling Xander,

It took two months for your letter to find its way here but when it did, I was thrilled!!

Yes! Yes, I still love you!!! Of course I am waiting for you. Don't you ever doubt that. There is nothing you could ever do that I would not forgive. There is nothing you could ever say that would sway my heart. I will always be here for you. No matter when you come home, my arms will be waiting!!

I will send you another picture. I will send you a hundred pictures and they will all be of me smiling with your name on my lips and my love for you shining in my eyes.

When I got your letter, I ran all the way to Mom's and I showed it to her. She has not had word from you in so long she was beginning to panic. When she read it, we both cried.

As we get ready for another Thanksgiving without
you, we all pray for your safety. We are also thankful for the beautiful baby girl that Da and Jenny had. They named her Drusilla. New life is amazing. It is hope for the future.

Have I moved on with my life? Xander, you are my life.

I will keep writing and trust that the letters find their way to you.

Always yours,

Spike

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December 21, 1967

Department of the Defense
Division of the United States Army

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Harris,

Regretfully, this letter is to inform you that your son, Private Alexander Harris was seriously injured in a military incident on the tenth of December. He and Private Riley Finn had been dispatched toward the Lee-Ta Province to retrieve a disabled jeep and return it to their temporary base when they struck a landmine buried at the side of the road.

As a result of the explosion your son sustained serious injury, the full extent of which we have not yet determined.

He has been flown to the Armed Forces Hospital in Siagon for treatment and you will be notified of his condition and prognosis as soon as possible.

We understand this is a difficult time for you and please know that our sympathies are with you and your family.
If you have any other questions, you may contact our office here in Washington, D.C.

Sincerely,

Captain Ralph J. Lucus

December 21, 1967

Department of the Defense
Division of the United States Army

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Robert Finn,

We regret to inform you that your son, Private Riley Finn was killed in a military incident on the tenth of December. He and Private Alexander Harris had
been dispatched toward the Lee-Ta Province to retrieve a disabled jeep and return it to their temporary base when they struck a landmine buried at the side of the road.

Your son expired from the injuries he sustained as a result of the explosion.

We will be contacting you with the information needed for the return of your son's remains and we will assist you if you choose to inter him with a military service.

We understand this is a difficult time for you and please know that our sympathies are with you and your family.

If you have any other questions, you may contact our office here in Washington, D.C.

Sincerely,

Captain Ralph J. Lucus
The End

Echo of a Bamboo Flute

Rating: NC17
Pairing: Spike/Xander
Disclaimer: The Bee owns none of the characters or products named in this story and makes no profit from it.

Author's note: The Bee does not claim to be an expert in the Viet Nam war, nor in the symptoms or treatment of PTSD. Warning: Angst. Misery.
Mentions of war and all bad things that come with war.
Strong language and sexual M/M content.

Summary: HAU. This is the third and final installment in the Hang Ten trilogy. It is three years from the summer of 1965 and two years since Xander was drafted into the Army. When he returns, he is damaged both physically and emotionally and it is up to Spike to try and reach him and give him back his life.

Special thanks to Naughty_Fae for the encouragement and to Silk_Labyrinth for the spelling and punctuation beta. Any other errors are on the Bee

Echo of a Bamboo Flute

by

BmblBee
Part One

Spike trotted at a gait just short of an all-out run. He pushed his way through the crowded airport terminal as he hurried back toward gate 7B and the 'mom and dad' that waited there for him.

"I talked to the military liaison. He said Xander's flight was delayed a few minutes at take-off but that it should be arriving here almost any time now. He said they have this gate designated as strictly for the servicemen arriving and taking off, so there shouldn't be any civilian interference."

Jessica nodded her head but her face remained turned toward the wall of glass that looked out over the airport runway. She stood next to her husband, but there was no physical contact between them nor had there been much conversation in the car on the way here.

The tension level had been high ever since they had gotten the original letter informing them of Riley's death and Xander's injuries. The subsequent
correspondence that outlined in blunt, unemotional medical terms the details of his specific condition did little to allay their fears.

The facts were cold. The boys were on a narrow trail en route to a small, temporary medical station to drop off supplies and try to get one of the medic's jeeps running when they hit a land mine. The explosion, which had hit on the passenger's side of their vehicle, had killed Riley almost immediately. Xander had been thrown free and barely missed being crushed by the jeep as it rolled.

The facts and realities of that one second in time were less clinical and detached than the Army would have liked to portray.

One second the boys from Sunnydale were chatting and talking about going home, and in the blink of an eye their world imploded. When the jeep's tire hit the deadly incendiary device, the blast sent the vehicle flipping up and over as chunks of hot metal and shattered glass flew everywhere. Both men were violently thrown from the vehicle like rag
dolls, as the deafening roar filled the air and burst Xander's eardrum. The last thing that went through Xander's mind before he lost consciousness was how much it sounded like the ocean's waves in Gull Cove.

When it happened, the constant noise of the jungle had ceased. The macaws fell silent. The never-ending chatter of small animals and tree frogs stopped. The air was thick with tension and soaked with the smell of blood and death.

And then it all began again as if nothing untoward had happened. Only this time a new sound joined in. It was the whispery hiss of the radiator water as it spilled out over the hot engine of the demolished vehicle.

The first time Xander woke, it was to the feel of a pain so intense that it seemed to rip apart the very fabric of his being. He could feel what seemed like a dozen hands lifting and pulling him from his cool damp, jungle bed and he cried out for them to stop and put him back.
He thought he was screaming but the sound was distant and muffled. He tried to look into the faces of his rescuers but his eyesight was blurred and battered by the shifting flashes of images that only served to make the pain in his head worse.

As he felt his body being roughly shoved into the back of a mobile ambulance, he was vaguely aware of a pinprick to the side of his neck and a merciful darkness that descended over him.

The next few days were a fog as he drifted from the world of hurt and disorientation to a place of peace and dreams. And those dreams were always the same. He was young, strong and innocent of the evils of war. He ran on the beach and he swam in the ocean.

He had friends and family. He had a life worth living. And always. Always at his side was Spike. Beautiful. Smiling. Blond hair and blue eyes that gazed at Xander with the warmth and comfort of love.
More than once, Xander awoke with a confused erection that was certain his mate was in bed next to him waiting to satisfy and be satisfied only to be questioned, "You gotta piss?"

The heavy doses of narcotics kept the pain to a dull throb and his brain in a field of disjointed ideas and thoughts. He knew he had been hurt. But how? Did it matter? Was there something else that he should be asking? Each time he tried to focus, sleep overtook him.

Gradually the times of wakefulness stretched from a few moments to an hour, then two and three. He knew that if he turned his head to the right, he could hear and distinguish voices and sounds. If he turned to the left, it was muffled and echoey. He wasn't stupid. He understood what that meant. His eardrum was blown out. He would be partially deaf. He could live with that.

By the end of the week, a disturbing clarity began accompanying the wakefulness. A sharpening of
the senses that was the result of a lessening of the sedation. And suddenly, at midnight on the sixth night of his hospitalization, Xander let out a scream that pierced the darkness.

He knew.

He was, in one horrible instant, aware of it all. He knew the bandages over his face were not a protection from the light. They were not put there to make his stay in the hospital more comfortable. They were there because he was blind. Blind and half deaf, and the most sickening part of that was that it didn't matter.

What mattered was a deeper truth. A question whose answer he knew in his heart.

Riley was dead.

His best friend. His companion. The boy who would not have been in this hell on earth if it weren't for his pledge to stand by his friend. The boy whose body would not have been lying, torn and bleeding,
out in the jungle if Xander had not driven over that land mine. The boy Xander had killed.

It took four of the Army's biggest and burliest to hold him down as he struggled and fought against an unseen enemy as well as himself. His arms flailed and his legs kicked as the restraint straps were quickly and efficiently applied. When the needle again entered his neck, he all but cried with gratitude.

By the next day when he awoke again, all the fight had gone from him. He listened with disinterest as the doctor cataloged his injuries. As suspected, his left eardrum was burst. Although both eyes were covered, the right one would heal. The left one would not. Due to a flying piece of shrapnel from the bomb, his left eye was gone. His legs and chest had been burned, and although there would be a certain amount of scarring, his body would be fully functional.

Riley Finn's name was never mentioned.
And at that point, the healing of Xander's body began. He ate when he was told and he held his dick into a urinal cup when he had to piss. He gave no resistance when he was turned, twisted, bathed and examined, and when the doctor declared him ready, Xander sat up on the side of his bed.

Judy, the perky nurse with the dishwater-blond hair had taken a particular interest in the quiet, wounded American soldier. She fusses over him during the day and she sat by his bedside when he pretended to sleep at night. She chattered with him constantly although she never got more than a one- or two-word response. She knew he was hurting in his body and soul and she tried her best to help him.

"All righty then, Private Harris. Looks like you've laid around in that bed long enough. Dr. Harry says you can get up and start putting some weight on your legs and you know what Dr. Harry McDonnell says, he means. So, let's see what we can do. First I'll have you sit up and swing your legs over the side. When you get that far, stop and rest for a minute.
You ready to try?"

Xander just blinked. The bandage that circled his forehead had been removed yesterday and his right eye, although still blurry, was now starting to focus. The heavy patch that covered his left eye remained firmly in place. Already adopting the habit of tilting his head to the side, his good ear picked up her voice and his brain processed the information.

Internally he wanted to scream at her to leave him the fuck alone. Riley was dead, what did he care about walking? What right did he have to get his life back when he had taken Riley's? But he knew better. Ranting and raving would get him another needle but would not bring his friend back. However he looked at it, he knew he was a punchline to one of the universe's great jokes.

The best he could hope for was that cooperation would assure that they would then leave him alone.

Xander nodded. He reached down and tossed aside the sheet that covered his legs and he frowned. It
was as if he were looking at another man's body. The skin was pink and raw from the burns and his calves were shrunken from weeks of poor nutrition and lack of use.

So what? He was scarred and ugly but Riley was.... Using all the strength he could muster, Xander hooked his hands under his knees and he hoisted his limbs around. He was amazed at how sapped of strength he felt after what should have been an effortless move.

"Great job, Alex. Is it okay if I call you that? All righty now, hon, slip slow and easy off the cot and onto your feet. Don't be surprised if your muscles can't hold you yet. If you start to go down, I'll catch you. Ready? Let's go."

Silently and obediently, Xander did as he was told. Unconcerned with the back of his hospital gown that gaped open as he scooted, Xander worked his way to the edge of the bed and he eased off. The second his bare feet hit the cold floor, his knees buckled and his body weight felt like a ton as
he fell forward and away from her promised safe landing, into a heap on the hard tile.

In a flash, whether it was her condescending chuckle or his own crashing reality, something deep down inside of him snapped and the emotional mercury in the thermometer of his being shot straight up in a fiery fury. Just like the land mine, his anger exploded as he slapped and kicked at her viciously while he shouted and screamed till his throat was raw.

"You fucking cunt! You did that on purpose! You fucking bitch!! You think that's funny? You want to play your silly-ass fucking games with a fucking cripple? Well, fuck you! Fuck you, you goddamn bitch. Cunt! Whore!"

A moment later, the needle pierced his neck and the warm oblivion descended over him.
Part Two

"Oh, holy mother of God, I need a drink."

Tony Harris muttered as he scratched his scalp while his left knee bounced nervously. He now sat by himself, glancing up every few moments to see if there was any indication of his son's arrival. So far, the runway remained clear. He watched his wife as she paced back and forth and spoke in quiet tones to the boy beside her. Tony wondered if she knew how much he still loved her. Probably not. He certainly had given no indication of it over the past three months.

Ever since receiving the letter advising them of their son's situation, he simply had not known what to say. He cringed and shied away from the display of emotion although heaven knew he felt it deeply enough. Inside, he cried and screamed and railed against the injustices of the universe. Outwardly, he
remained the stoic strength that he believed his 
wife needed him to be.

And each day they drifted further and further apart. Sometimes he wondered if they would survive this. It felt as though their marriage was a steam engine chugging faster and faster towards a washed out bridge and he didn't have a clue as to where the brakes were.

Tony sighed and picked up a newspaper before tossing it back down.

He looked all around the section of the airport that had been designated for military personnel and their families. He wondered if this was where the Finn family came when they had to retrieve their son from the cargo hold. Christ. Tony shook his head.

How had life gotten so fucked up? Nothing had turned out the way he expected. The way it should have. Was this the curse that was promised to him by the Good Book in Sunday school? Were the sins
of the father being visited on the son? Lord knows, Tony had done more than his fair share of sinning during his lifetime. Drinking, cursing, gambling, and that one time in the back seat of his car with the barmaid at the Mustang.

Was karma exacting payment from Xander on a bill that Tony owed?

"Tony, did you remember to gas up the car so we don't have to stop on the way home?"

Tony was startled from his mental wanderings by his wife's question. "Wha?"

"Gas?"

"Oh, yeah. Sure."

With the same look of disappointment that he had seen in her eyes so often lately, she turned away from him and he returned to his solitude. This time, however, he wasn't to be ignored. Instead, Spike sat down quietly beside him and placed his hand gently
"It will be all right, Dad. I'm scared too but no matter what's happened, this is still Xander and I just thank God that he's coming home."

Tony turned to fully face the boy. He frowned slightly as he studied the young, trusting face and the open, honest, blue eyes. He had long ago come to terms with this very odd situation. He did not understand it and he simply refused to consider what happened behind closed doors but the truth of it was, it felt right. Whatever caused this anomaly, there was no denying that the depth of this boy's love and devotion to Xander was without question. No girl would have remained as steadfast as Spike had and for that, the boy had Tony's stamp of approval.

"I know, Spike. It's just that...."

"IT'S HERE! LOOK! THE PLANE IS LANDING!"

Jessica's announcement had them on their feet and,
along with the other friends and families who awaited the arrival of their loved ones, they hurried toward the doors that would open as the plane's passengers disembarked.

After several more minutes, it happened. Not with a jubilant burst of hurrah but with the slow, marching parade of haggard looking, defeated and damaged soldiers entering single-file into the waiting arms of the sobbing mothers and stunned fathers. There was no jovial celebrating. The faces of the soldiers told a story that no one wanted to hear.

Spike paced frantically. He studied each passing face for fear he wouldn't recognize his own true love. He swiped his sweaty palms on his thighs repeatedly and as the steady stream of the walking wounded slowed to a trickle, he began to panic that Xander was not coming. Possibly he had missed his flight. Maybe his health prevented....

Then. There he was. Second from the last. His back ramrod straight despite the slump of his shoulders. His feet shuffled forward as though moving without
conscious thought or will. He was thin to the point of near emaciation. His uniform hung on his frame comically, as if it were nothing more than a Halloween costume. The bill of his hat rode low over his face, but not low enough to conceal the patch over his left eye or the scarring on his cheekbone.

A sound of pained shock from Jessica pierced Spike's heart and got his feet moving. Concern that they may frighten Xander with the intensity of their emotions led Spike to touch his 'mom' on the arm, indicating she should stay where she was, and he moved quickly to claim his love.

Xander had stopped. He didn't look around and he made no effort to search the faces of the families that clustered and shuffled around him in a claustrophobic proximity. He didn't know what to do. He could feel his anxiety level rising quickly and he struggled not to scream and make a spectacle of himself.

Suddenly, he was no longer alone. When he felt the
familiarity of the two arms slam around him, he dropped the duffle bag from his shoulders and he held on tight. Within seconds, four more arms encircled him and he heard his name spoken in voices he had almost forgotten.

"Xander. Oh, God! Xander!"

He didn't know what to do. He didn't have the words to say and he wasn't even sure how to feel. It had been so long. An eternity.

Finally, Tony took the lead and he stepped back, releasing his bear hug on his boy. "Come on. Let's get the fuck outta here. The car is right outside and Mom's got a big dinner waiting at home."

Jessica laughed lightly and she brushed her hand over Xander's back lovingly. "That's right. I fixed all your favorites. There's a roast with potatoes in the oven and a cherry pie cooling on the sideboard."

Xander stood, stoic and silent, giving no indication that he had heard. He kept his head down, unable
to make eye contact. He knew his appearance was disgusting and once they got a good look at him, he doubted that anyone would be able to keep their dinner down.

Sensing Xander's unease, Spike was eager to get them out of this crowded pack of people who were all trying to cope. He scooped up Xander's duffle bag and flung it over his own shoulder as he looped his other arm through Xander's and he began tugging. "Come on, Xan. It's time to go home."

Together, the four of them began the long walk through the terminal towards the bright sunshine of a California afternoon. The hustle and bustle of civilians coming and going through the airport on holidays was in stark contrast to the morose mood of the military section they had just left.

Spike continued to chatter nervously. He talked about the beach and he expounded on his classes at the university. His concentration was so fixed on his steady stream of babble that Spike failed to notice the looks that were being shot at his lover's
uniform.

Until the unthinkable happened.

They were just steps away from the front doors when a disembodied voice came from somewhere in the crowd.

"Murderer! Baby killer!"

Spike felt Xander flinch, yet outwardly he gave no response. Spike, on the other hand, was furious. He stopped dead in his tracks and spun around. He wanted to shout at the ignorant coward that had made such a rotten accusation. He wanted to find the perpetrator and beat him to a bloody pulp. Quickly, before he could act, Tony took hold of Spike and shoved him outside as Jessica assumed the grip on Xander's arm and continued to lead her soldier out of the terminal.

"Stop it Spike. Let it go. You know the sentiment against the war. Anything you say or do will only make it worse."
"But, Dad, it's Xan. How can anyone say...."

"That's right. It's Xan. Think of Xander and let's just get him out of here."

Spike knew that Tony was right. Still, it burned in his gut to let that go. Couldn't they see? Xander had already sacrificed so much for these ungrateful pigs. How dare they speak to him like that?

With a firm hand on the back of Spike's neck, Tony steered the blond out toward the parking lot where Jessica and her son waited patiently next to the Ford until Tony unlocked it. He tossed his son's duffle bag in the trunk and hurried to climb behind the wheel as Xander climbed in the backseat. When Spike attempted to get him to scoot over, Xander's face reddened in shame.

"I need to sit on the left. My hearing.... I can't...."

"Oh, yeah, sure. I'm sorry. I wasn't.... Sorry."
Spike ran around to the other side and he jumped in while mentally kicking himself for his stupidity. Once they were all in, Tony pulled out into traffic and headed for the highway. Spike glanced over at the young man who was slumped and staring silently out the window.

He was sure once they got home things would get better.

Part Three

The car ride from the airport was strained and tense. Tony sat silently, staring straight ahead. His hands were clamped in the ten and two positions on the steering wheel and he gave all of his intense concentration to his driving. Jessica sat as far over on the passenger's side as she could. She listened as Spike continued to chatter like a magpie in the back seat, and she would interject a random comment or
two when he paused to take a breath.

Xander's contribution to the conversation was an occasional, fractional nod of his head as he continued to stare out his side window. It was the only indication that he still retained hearing in his right ear. With each question, Spike prayed that Xander would turn to face him, but he soon realized that was not going to happen.

"I got a few days off class so I can help get you settled. The professors have been great. They gave me my course work and homework ahead of time so that I don't have to get caught up when I go back. Because I'm already. Caught up."

Silence.

"Oh, I don't think you got my letters, but I wrote to you every day when you were in the hospital. I told you all about the flat I got for us. It's over near the campus where the places are not as expensive. I'm still only working my part-time job but it's enough to pay the rent and buy some groceries. Da, as well
as Mom and Dad, gave me some secondhand furniture. It isn't a lot but it looks really good. I figure you will want to stay at your parents' for a day or two so you can visit with them, but then over the weekend we can pack up whatever you want to take and we can get you all moved in. It will be great. I even have...."

"Here we are."

Tony's announcement flowed through the car on a wave of relief that saw an end to the unreciprocated rambling that Spike seemed unable to shut off. When the Ford turned into the driveway and slowed to a stop, everyone gave a quiet sigh before flinging the doors open and climbing out. Immediately, Tony hurried to the trunk to retrieve the duffle bag and Jessica hastened to the house on the excuse of getting their dinner ready.

Spike jumped from his side and rushed around to help Xander out. A move of offered assistance that clearly was not appreciated as Xander scowled and leaned away from Spike's reach. Tony pretended
not to notice the interaction. "Okay, then. Well, I'll take your bag on in. Are you two coming?"

Xander hesitated. He hadn't left his spot beside the car and he obviously had something on his mind. "Um, yeah, in a minute. I need to talk to Spike for a second first."

Spike's face burst into a big grin. This was it. All the fears of rejection that had been gnawing at him were sent scurrying on their way. Xander wanted them to be alone! He wanted to talk privately. What else could it mean but proclamations of love and assurances of their life together. He almost giggled with impatience as he waited for Tony to disappear into the house.

When they were finally alone, he turned to his love and frowned in confusion as he watched Xander dig into his uniform pocket. A gift? It was the only thought Spike could come up with as his heart swelled with love and joy and reassurance. He stepped closer and watched as Xander's hand shook as it retrieved what he had been scrounging for. He
then held his fist out and when Spike's palm extended, Xander dropped several crumpled dollar bills into it. "Be a pal and run down to the liquor store. Pick me up a bottle of whiskey. If that's enough and they got the cheap shit, get me a couple bottles."

Spike stared at the money in his hand. His bubble burst and his heart sank. He looked up and nearly cried out at what he saw. The harsh light of day accentuated the deep creases in Xander's face and darkened the circle under his eye. His other eye wore a cheap black eye patch and the skin beneath the patch was scarred and grey. His whole body trembled, encompassed in an air of sickness and disease. Still, Xander kept his head tipped down and he stared at his shoes as he waited for Spike's answer.

Spike would not refuse. Anything. Whatever Xander needed, Spike would supply. Quietly, Spike smoothed out the mangled bills and he took a step backward. "Yeah, sure. No problem. Um, I'll go now and be right back."
Xander gave a curt nod of the head before he turned his back on Spike and he walked into the house, closing the door behind him. Spike was stunned. He was heartbroken and felt sick in the pit of his stomach, but he was nowhere near ready to give up. He stuffed the money in his own pocket and hurried the two blocks down the street to the State store.

"Oh, there you are. Where's Spike?"

Jessica fussed nervously around the kitchen. When she saw Xander she looked past him, expecting to see his blond shadow and surprised to see him alone. She watched as her son drifted in and looked all around as though he had never seen the kitchen before. He then picked up a cookie off of the plate she had set out. He took one bite, spit it back out into his hand and tossed the rest in the trash.
"He said he had an errand. He'll be back in a minute. May I please go to my room?"

Jessica blinked back the tears as she tried to keep her voice level and gentle. "Sweetie, of course. We kept your room just as it was. You aren't in the Army anymore, you don't have to ask permission to...."

The rest was effectively cut off when he turned on his heel and disappeared up the steps. Seconds later, she heard the door close and the lock click. Jessica took off her apron. She folded it neatly and laid it on the counter. She then sat down at the kitchen table where she laid her head on her arms and she began to cry.

Spike hurried back up the sidewalk. He had the two purchased bottles in an oversized paper sack that he had, as discreetly as possible, tucked under his arm. When he entered the living room, he paused to catch his breath. "Where's Xander? Is he in the kitchen?"
Tony sat staring at a television that he had forgotten to turn on. His voice was flat and unemotional. "No. He's in his room."

Spike looked around. The house had never felt so empty. He faintly heard Jessica crying in the kitchen and he knew things had not gone well. Without announcement, he turned and darted up the steps. While he knew Xander probably didn't want to see him, the two bottles in his possession should buy him entry.

When he reached the closed door, he tried the knob and was not surprised to find it locked. Rapping lightly, he waited before calling Xander's name. When he got no answer, he knocked again, harder, preferring to assume that Xander's hearing disability was the reason for the lack of response. His only answer was silence.

Spike was unsure what to do. He took a step backward away from the barrier between them then he stepped back in. He raised his hand to knock again, then lowered his hand and paused.
Just as bewilderment was flooding him with uncertainty a voice from the other side resolved his dilemma.

"Did you get it?"

"Yes, it was inexpensive so I got...."

"Just leave it outside the door."

"Xander, I wanted to talk...."

"No, not now. I have a headache. I just want to lay down. We can talk later."

Spike fought the urge to cry and beg Xander to open the door. He wanted to touch him. He was desperate to see him. His body craved a connection that his mind was watching dissolve away. With a sad feeling of defeat, Spike took the bag from under his arm and he crouched down to follow Xander's instructions.

Then he stopped. Suddenly and most unexpectedly,
his despair was replaced with a wave of anger that washed over him and rocked him back on his heels. He stood bolt upright and he again stuffed the bag under his arm as his fist slammed against the door.

"Bullshit, Xander! If you want this damn bag, you'll open this fucking door. Now, or I walk away and it goes with me!"

Instantly the door was jerked open, and the look of fury on Xander's face gave Spike a moment of concern before he remembered. This was Xander. Spike clutched the whiskey with an iron grip as he waited for an invitation in.

Apparently none was to be forthcoming.

There they stood. The uniform was gone and Xander wore only white boxers and a white undershirt. His feet were bare and the hat that shaded his face was tossed on the bed. Spike's mouth fell open and he was absolutely dumbfounded. There was not one part of Xander's body that was not marred and scarred. Starting at
the discolored toes and missing toenails, up his pink shrunken legs to the entire left side of his torso where the flesh had struggled to recover from a series of devastating injuries.

And then there was his face. He was almost unrecognizable as the young innocent boy he had fallen in love with almost three years ago. But the distortion was not due to the missing eye or the cheap black eye patch, and it had nothing to do with the scars that ran downward from under the patch like tears that never dried. No, the feature that reflected the greatest change was the look in the eye he still had left.

It glared at Spike with a depth that said it had seen too much. It was filled to the brim with the knowledge that the world is a filthy, contaminated sty totally void of love or justice or warmth.

"You fucking seen enough to satisfy you?"

For the first time, Spike had to face the realization that the Xander he knew was gone.
Part Four

Xander darted up the stairs and into his old bedroom. He couldn't believe he had just humiliated himself by asking his mother's permission to be excused. He stepped into his past and he shut the door behind him. He quickly flipped the lock to prevent any intruders and he leaned back against the door.

He was alone.

He was alone for the first time in almost two years. He had forgotten what silence sounded like. There was no gunfire, no planes or helicopters overhead. No bugs, birds or animals in the jungle and most importantly, no voices. The constant, teeth-grinding irritation of people shouting, yelling, laughing and even just yammering on had mercifully stopped.
Pushing off from the door, Xander eased reverently into the room. He looked all around, trying to judge and see it from the perspective of only one eye. It should feel familiar. It should feel like home. Instead, it felt like being in a museum. The artifacts of one Alexander Harris had been organized and displayed in what had been his natural habitat, preserved for future generations.

Of which there would be none.

He walked around the bed and he tipped his head as he tried to imagine. Spike had said he slept here while Xander was gone. Xander snorted. It was a sure bet the last time Spike would want to be in that bed.

Spike.

Thoughts of the blond tugged painfully in his heart. Spike was all that kept him going. His letters reassured him during the early days of basic training and grounded him when he was faced with the
shocking realities of the jungle and the horrors of war. Spike was faithful in his writing. He never slacked off like most of the friends and families of the other soldiers.

Knowing Spike was waiting had been Xander's anchor.

And when he had been injured, Spike's letters had more than once stopped him from suicide. Before he could see, a nurse would sit at his side and read and reread the words of comfort and love. When he could do it for himself, he would stare at the lines until they blurred, ran together and gave Xander a splitting headache.

He slept with them under his pillow. He cried as he clutched them in his hands. He never wrote back. He couldn't. He knew Spike was his past and that what they had would never survive once Spike was face-to-face with Xander's grotesque disfigurements.

But Xander was a coward. He knew he should just
write to Spike and explain. He should describe the horror that was now his face and give Spike his freedom. Spike deserved to find someone beautiful like him. He had said Penn was available, maybe that had been a hint. Maybe Spike had already moved on and was simply complying with Xander's plea that he never receive a Dear John letter.

Xander rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. Thoughts of Spike made him twitchy as his mind shifted from feelings of lost love to wondering where the fuck he was with that whiskey. How the fuck long did it take? The craving for the alcohol made him itch. It made his skin crawl and his scalp sweat. Why the fuck had the old man picked now, after all these years, to climb on the wagon and dry out?

He scratched at his arms nervously, and suddenly the restrictive feel of the uniform threatened to strangle him. His heart pounded and strange high-pitched whining sounds escaped his lips as he jerked, pulled and tugged till the shirt, shoes, pants and cap were discarded. His chest hurt. It felt like a
heart attack. He knew it wasn't.

"Calm down!" he told himself. "Just calm the fuck down."

His fists clenched and unclenched as he squeezed his one good eye shut, and he concentrated on his breathing in the manner instructed when the anxiety attacks threatened to overwhelmed him.

Then, diverting his attention, there was a knock on the door. Soft. Quiet. Hesitant. A small mouse approaching the lion's den. He wouldn't have even heard it if he had been facing in the other direction. Spike. Spike was back. Xander tiptoed silently across the floor, instinctively avoiding the floorboard spots that he knew groaned and creaked. Stealth was a talent quickly learned in the jungle.

"Xander?"

The voice was so sweet, so pure and innocent.

Xander pressed his forehead and palms against the
door. Spike was just inches away. In the past, he would have jerked the door open and pulled the startled boy into his arms. They would have tussled, wrestled and tumbled together onto the bed as they laughed and groped at each others bodies. They would have kissed and relished the feeling of flesh pressed to flesh.

Not now. Edgar Allan Poe said it best. Nevermore.

He needed to confront this. He needed to be honest and unlock the shackles that kept Spike bound to him but he couldn't, not without a drink or ten. Maybe then...maybe after....

"Did you get it?"

"Yes, it was inexpensive so I got...."

"Just leave it outside the door."

"Xander, I wanted to talk...."

"No, not now. I have a headache. I just want to lay
down. We can talk later."

Xander waited. He strained to hear if the bottles were being set down but it was difficult with his limited hearing. He frowned. He would give it another moment to....

"Bullshit, Xander! If you want this damn bag, you'll open this fucking door. Now! Or I walk away and it goes with me!"

The sudden, forceful fist-slam against the door sent Xander reeling backward in shock. Immediately his temper flared and before he could reconsider, he flipped the lock and jerked the door open.

And there they were. Face to face. For a fast second, Xander considered covering up or at least turning away. But it was too late for that and he was through hiding in shame. Spike wanted to see? Fine! "You fucking seen enough to satisfy you?"

Before Spike could gag in revulsion, Xander snatched the bag from the stunned boy's hands and
he turned his back. He quickly crossed the room toward his dresser where he set the bottles down. He gave no more thought to the bedroom door he had left open or the young man who may or may not still be staring at the sideshow freak.

Xander hurriedly twisted the lid off the bottle of Bush Mill. His hands trembled with the need and when the smell hit his nose, he quivered. Quickly, he closed his eye, tipped the bottle and groaned as the golden liquid burned its way down his throat and landed like hot lava in his stomach.

It helped. Sweet Jesus how it helped. It soothed the raw nerve endings in his body and it quietened the voices in his head. Now with his hands much steadier, he tipped it up and took a second swallow.

"Better?"

Xander spun around, bewildered as to why Spike was still there. Hadn't he gotten enough to satisfy his curiosity? Was there a conversation unfinished? A joke whose punchline was not clear?
Xander swiped the back of his hand over his mouth and took another defiant gulp. He then dropped down to sit on the end of his bed and he snorted derisively.

"Yeah, it is. I'd offer you some but obviously I need it more than you do and I'm a selfish bastard. So there you are. Speaking of which, why are you still here?"

Spike blinked. He closed the bedroom door and he moved cautiously forward, unsure what Xander's reaction would be to a sudden move or the illusion of aggressive behavior.

"I'm here because I have waited a long time for you to come home. I'm here because I missed you and I love you. Look, honey, I can't begin to understand what you have been thr....."

Xander leapt to his feet and loomed over the smaller man in a stumbling move that struck fear in Spike's heart. His voice boomed as he waved the
whiskey bottle high over his head.

"No. No, you can't! While you've been partying and fucking around with who-knows-who, I've been laying in the mud and the blood of the jungle. Do you know what it feels like to have half your face blown off? No, you don't have a clue. While you were getting your dick sucked I was busy getting my best friend killed! You don't know, Spike! You don't know SHIT!"

Spike was dumbfounded. He had a million denials and justifications spinning in his brain, all the time knowing that none of them would even come close to touching the real problem. He shook his head and reached out tentatively, only to have Xander move back out of his reach.

"Go home, Spike. I don't want you here."

Spike swallowed hard and struggled not to cry. He knew if there was any hope of talking to Xander, now was not that time. Instead he nodded and reached into his pocket, pulling out the keys to the
car he had lovingly cared for over the past two years. He extended his hand. "Here. The keys to your woody. I kept her...."

Xander's face screwed up in confused disgust. "What are you? A comedian or just a fucking idiot? One eye, Spike! Hellooo. No depth perception. I can't fucking drive anymore. Keep it. Sell it. Drive it over a fucking cliff. I don't give a damn. Now, will you just go?"

Spike had reached his breaking point.

He spun on his heel and ran from the room. He dashed down the stairs and out the front door, ignoring both of his pseudoparents who called after him. With tears welling up and blurring his vision he sped, driving recklessly toward the small apartment that was to be their home. When he got the front door open, he ran in, tore down the big "WELCOME HOME" banner that he had hung, and he curled up on the sofa and cried.
Part Five

"Pike! Pike! Pike! Pike!"

Spike stood just inside the front door and waited as the chubby, dark-haired whirlwind toddled toward him. Her short, stubby arms were flung out wide and her clumsy gait threatened with every step to see her tumble over face-first onto the carpet.

When she finally reached him he bent down and scooped her up, swinging her wildly in the air, which caused the expected squeal and giggle.

"There's my little toad-girl. How is my wittle bitty girl this morning?"

Although the words and question were not fully
understood, the intent was and the little girl laughed and squirmed in her big brother's arms.

Jenny, who was sitting at the dining room table with the morning paper smiled at the familiar exchange.

"Well I must admit, I didn't expect to see you this morning. Or today for that matter. Possibly not even tomorrow. Where is your other half?"

Spike carried Drusilla over, then gently set the child on her feet and watched as she waddled away. He pulled up a chair and sat down. His head dropped and he clasped his hands in his lap.

"It didn't exactly go as well as I had planned."

Jenny carefully laid down her paper and glanced over to assure herself that Dru would remain occupied with her Little Tykes play kitchen. The wave of sadness rolling off her stepson was as thick as apple butter.

"What happened, Will? Did Xander make it home? Is he sick?"
Spike looked up and Jenny could see how red and puffy his eyes were, triggering a major 'uh-oh' in her heart. She knew Spike had been counting the days till this reunion. Ever since word of Xander's injuries and imminent discharge had reached them, he had 'x'ed the days off the calendar. Once they had been assured that he would recover, all that had mattered was that Xander would be home and Spike talked of nothing else.

"It's terrible, Jenny. He isn't Xander. He's so different. He made it clear that he doesn't want me anymore. He threw me out. I...I think he hates me."

On the last three words, the dam broke and Spike's face fell into his hands as he began to cry. Jenny immediately rushed to him and scooped him up in her arms as Dru glanced over in disinterest.

"Oh no, Will. Don't you believe that. Don't you think that for one minute. Listen to me, Will. I have a cousin. He lives in Arizona, and because he doesn't travel, I don't see him much. Karl was in the war."
Korea. He was wounded in a firefight and he came home without a leg. It changed him too, Will. He was angry. Mean. Defiant and hurtful to everyone that tried to help him. Luckily, he has a wonderful wife who has a streak of prison guard in her personality. Susie jumped on him with both feet and rode him like a wild rodeo bronco. She dragged him to the Veterans Hospital and stood by him while he was fitted with a false leg. She even threatened to beat him over the head with it when he didn't cooperate with the physical therapy."

Spike chuckled at the mental image as Jenny wiped the tears from his face with her apron. The flowered fabric was soft and threadbare from years of repeated washings and it felt amazingly comforting.

"So what happened? Are they all right?"

Jenny crouched down so that Spike had to look into her eyes.

"I'm not going to lie to you, Will. Karl is not the man he was before, but he's a good man now. He and
Susie are still together and they're still very much in love. They have good times and they have not-so-good times. They take life day by day, and you and Xander can too. This is the hardest time for him, but the worst thing you can do is believe that he doesn't want you. He's trying to find a life for himself. He's lost and struggling to learn a new way to live. It's like he's still slashing his way through the jungle. Don't leave him out there all alone. Whether he wants to admit it or not, he needs you to be there.

Spike's watery blue eyes sparked with a small glimmer of hope. What she said felt right and he could be Susie-obstinate too. He threw his arms around Jenny and hugged her.

"Thank you, Jenny. That was just what I needed to hear. I hope Da knows how lucky he is to have you."

Jenny cupped Spike's face and she kissed his cheek. "I'll be sure and remind him. Now, don't you have someplace to be?"
Spike jumped to his feet. He snuffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve. He called a quick "Bye bye" to his half-sister and she responded with a plump hand in the air as he rushed back out and jumped behind the wheel. Xander had hurt his feelings, but the next time he would be ready. Getting rid of him would not be easy.

Spike had long ago stopped knocking at 'mom and dad's' house. It had, over the course of the past two years, been his second home. Still, as he stood outside the familiar front door, he wondered if, in light of the newly developed situation, perhaps his open door policy had been revoked. Maybe Xander had given explicit instructions that he was no longer welcome. Spike sincerely hoped not. But there was only one way to find out.

Acting as if nothing had changed, Spike opened the door and breezed in. Immediately, Jessica ran to meet him with a hug and a kiss on his forehead. "Oh, Spike, thank God you came back."

Spike could feel the air of despair and gloom that
hung in the house. He glanced around, and although on the surface everything looked the same, he could tell that nothing was. "Where's Dad?"

Jessica twisted and wrung the skirt of her apron between her hands. Even though she was painfully aware of her son's limited hearing, she kept her voice low and quiet.

"Dad went out early this morning. He said he was going to the park for a walk but he has been gone for hours. Oh Spike, I just don't know what to do. Xander never came out of his room yesterday. He hasn't eaten for nearly twenty-four hours. I heard him go into the bathroom around midnight but other than that, he just stays in there. I knocked but he won't answer. What are we going to...."

Jessica broke down and sobbed. Her heart broke under the crush of reality, as her hopes and dreams of a warm, loving homecoming melted down the drain.
Gently, Spike stepped up and he pulled her into an embrace of love and reassurance. He was mildly surprised by the fact that at some point he had grown several inches taller than her. It was a realization that reaffirmed his resolve. He was a man now and it was time to prove that by salvaging this fractured situation and plastering them back together into some sort of family unit. With that as his intent, Spike stepped back and he looked her in the eye.

"Okay, enough of this. You go into the kitchen and fix him a bowl of noodle soup and a half a sandwich. I'll take it up to him and see that he eats it."

Although it was still too soon for hope, Jessica was filled with gratitude for the new set of shoulders that would assume the weight of this burden, and she hurried off to follow his orders. Spike paused during the time it took her to cross the length of the living room. He repeatedly glanced up the stairs although there was nothing to see. He prayed that at any minute now, Xander would stroll down the steps and cheerfully announce that he was hungry
but Spike knew the odds of that happening were right up there with the chances of My Mother The Car returning to television.

Within minutes, she hustled back out and handed him a tray with a bowl of steaming soup and a peanut butter sandwich. She held it out as if offering him the golden fleece, and when it was transferred from her hands to his she all but bowed. With a short nod of his head, Spike started up the steps as she gripped the banister post and watched him go.

When he reached the top, he raised his hand to knock, then stopped not wanting a repeat of yesterday's debacle. He tried the knob and was relieved to find it unlocked. Without announcement, he swung the door open wide and marched in. Immediately Xander, who was lying curled up on the bed, reacted as though the enemy had raised a gun and had him in their sights.

He rolled off onto the floor, snatching his eye patch off the end table as he went, and he crouched,
trembling and wedging himself halfway under the bed. The startling, unexpected reaction caused Spike to step back as he realized what he had done. Quickly, he placed the tray on the dresser and he eased over.

"Xan, I'm sorry. It's me. It's Spike. Shit."

Despite the wash of terror that had rolled through Xander at the unanticipated intrusion, he scrambled to salvage some shred of dignity as he hurriedly put on the eye patch and fumbled to stand on shaky legs. He cursed and berated that little voice in his head that rejoiced and shouted at him, 'Yes! He came back. Spike came back.'

Leaning back against the wall for stability, Xander scowled and growled. "What the fuck do you want now?"

Spike straightened his shoulders and went about the task of clearing a spot on the messy, rumpled bed for Xander to sit.
"I'm here to see that you stop acting like an asshole. Mom says you haven't eaten and that upsets her. Now, she made you a lovely bowl of noodle soup and I expect you to sit down and eat it! When you're done, you can continue in your bullish ways and again toss me out but I have to warn you, I will keep coming back!"

Part Six

The tension hung so thickly in the air that Spike could hardly breathe. The two men stood squared off across the room and it was clear that Xander was not going to make the first move. Like a trapped wild animal, he remained with his back against the wall and a look of furious fear shooting daggers from his one remaining eye.

Spike used the ensuing moments of the temporary standoff to assess the situation. His peripheral vision picked up the disaster of the room. The posters had been torn from the walls in such a haphazard manner that small squares of paint had gone with them. The sheet and blanket had been jerked from the mattress leaving it slightly cocked
on the boxsprings and the covers were piled on the floor in what could only be described as a sleep nest in a corner of the room away from the windows.

It was obvious that that was where Xander had spent most of the night, since one of the cheap whiskey bottles lying in the nest was empty and the other was halfway to follow.

And there they stood. As the strange man across the room continued to glare menacingly, rather than be afraid, all Spike felt was sorrow, sadness and determination. He regretted that the carelessness of his brusque entry had startled the shell-shocked ex-soldier, but he quickly decided that worrying about his mistake was a waste of time.

It wasn't the first stupid thing Spike had done, and as he felt his way through the muddled mess of this situation, he was fairly certain it wouldn't be the last.

Instead, he broke the challenging eye contact with what he hoped was a relaxed smile, and he fussed
around while launching into a light-hearted chatter about the arrival of lunch. "All right then. You have a seat and eat the soup. I would like to see you eat the sandwich too but if...."

"I don't want any fucking soup. If you really want to be a helpful little errand-boy, run back down to the liquor store and get me another bottle."

Spike kept his attention on the soup. He studied the small noodles as they floated aimlessly in the yellow broth while he took a moment to stamp down his hurt feelings. On the upside, he had gotten Xander talking even if it was negativity on toast. Maybe it was time for a bit of posturing of his own.

Standing as straight and tall as possible, Spike stood by the bed with the tray in his hands. He booted the corner of the mattress to right it and he huffed.

He was no mouse to be sent skittering and it was time Xander understood that. He tipped his head just a fraction and he sucked his teeth in thought as he again matched Xander stare for stare. Finally,
when he saw a tiny spark of uncertainty in Xander's eye, Spike knew he had won the first small battle.

"Well, now that we have established that I am not leaving, I suggest you sit down and eat the lovely soup that your mother made for...."

"I said I don't want any fucking soup!"

"Eat the bloody soup, Xander! You want more of that stinking rot-gut whisky and I want you to eat the fucking soup! Now unless you want to trot your stinking, dirty underwear wearing self down to the State store and buy it, I guess you need me. So, a fair exchange. You eat what Mom cooks and I buy the liquor. For now. We will renegotiate the terms later."

Xander blinked and broke the steel stare he had maintained since Spike had barged into his room. He glanced down at the two bottles on the floor and his face wrinkled up as he mentally assessed the situation. He looked at the grungy boxers he wore and his eye darted over to the bowl of soup
that sat on a Betty Crocker serving tray in Spike's hands.

Spike could all but hear the wheels in Xander's head as they ground to a squeaky stop. With an angry resignation he eased forward, and to maintain Xander's bubble of safe space, Spike moved back. Each step the soldier took was silent and smooth as if practiced a dozen times a day had made it instinctual. He watched Spike constantly as he advanced, until he had achieved his ordered position next to the bed. Then he sat.

Spike nodded his head to let Xander know he had done well. When the distance between them narrowed, Spike's smile faltered as the smell rolling off Xander hit his nose. It was the stench of sweat, unwashed hair, diseased skin and teeth in desperate need of dental care.

The to-do list that was compiling in Spike's brain began running out of paper.

He carefully handed over the tray and gave a sigh of
relief when Xander simply accepted it. Truthfully, he had half-expected Xander to toss it back on him, dump it to the floor or just refuse it altogether, but when he saw the one good eye dart between the bed-nest and the soup, Spike knew he would eat.

Without waiting for him to start, Spike walked over to Xander's old school desk and he got the small wooden chair that had been knocked over. He picked it upright and began to carry it over to sit by the bed.

"After lunch I think...."

Xander scowled and immediately turned his head to the side, a move that reminded Spike that as well as the obvious missing eye, Xander also had only one good eardrum left. Without hesitation or apology, Spike moved his chair to the other side and continued his one-sided conversation as Xander took the first tentative slurps of the warm chicken soup.

"As I was saying, no offense my good chap, but you
smell like a dozen spoiled fish. So, after you finish, I think we need to see to a hot bath and some clean clothes."

On the first bite of the soup, Xander was nearly overwhelmed. Spike's words rolled over his head in a muffled "wa wa wa" that sounded like the teachers in the Charlie Brown Christmas cartoon, while the taste exploded on his tongue. When the heady broth sparked his taste buds, a million images flowed through his brain. His mother petting his fevered head when he had the measles. His grandmother, who always kept several cans on the shelf of her pantry in hopes of his coming over. His father's attempts at cooking when his mother was not home.

On and on they went. Dozens of fragmented pictures of random days. Days of no importance that now returned in full color to haunt and taunt him, all the while Spike continued to ramble about pointless generalities. On the third bite, Xander's stomach growled in gratitude that something besides cheap whisky was filling and nourishing it.
On the fourth bite, Spike turned away and pretended not to notice the tear that ran down Xander's face.

It took nearly twenty minutes, but the soup was finally gone. In his usual manner of over-exuberance, Spike decided to push the envelope and see if some solid food wouldn't work also.

"Excellent! Wonderful! Now, a few bites of sandwich and I will trot my little errand-boy arse, as you so nicely described it, down to the State store for you."

Xander hesitated. He sniffed the bread and thick brown glue that he vaguely remembered loving. He considered a flat-out refusal but, fuck, he could already feel the craving begin and he knew the little bit of alcohol that he had left wouldn't last another day. Reluctantly, he took a bite.

Almost immediately, he heaved and gagged. It was more than his body could accept and he quickly spit
it back onto the tray and again glared hatefully at the enemy who was causing him such pain. Mentally, Spike kicked his own arse but with a smile that simply said 'no matter,' he took the tray and set it back on the dresser.

This time when he sat back down in front of his companion he leaned forward, resting his forearms on his legs, and he spoke clearly so that there would be no mistake. It was time for them to establish a base. A starting point. An understanding.

"Listen to me, Xander. In the last letter you wrote to me you said you had done things. Things I would never understand or forgive. When I wrote you back, I told you that there was nothing you could ever do that I would not forgive. I loved you when I wrote that and I love you now. You're right, I have no idea what you went through over there and I can't begin to comprehend what it must be like to carry your injuries, but you are still alive and that's all that matters."

Xander's shoulders slumped and his head dropped
in defeat. When he spoke, his voice was so low and quiet that Spike knew he could not have been able to hear his own words.

"Am I? Am I still alive? Sometimes I'm not sure. It's worse when I am sure because I wish I wasn't. Riley's dead and I'm alive. The flip of a coin. He's rotting below ground and I'm rotting above. At least he has peace. Go away, Spike. I don't want your love anymore. I don't deserve it and I don't want it. Please, if you ever cared about me, just leave me alone."

Spike was rocked by the depth of despair and the threat of suicidal thoughts. He had no idea what to say or do as he realized this wasn't just a matter of him losing a boyfriend, but this was a situation of life and death and that Xander was walking a razor's edge between. Spike had to follow his heart. He wasn't a psychiatrist, but he was Xander's lover. Hopefully that would be enough.

"It isn't a matter of whether or not you deserve it or want it. My love for you just is. You can't dictate it
and you can't change it. Maybe you don't want me here, but I need to be here. I need to be close to you and take care of you. When you're feeling better, if you still want me to go, I will."

Xander snorted in disgust. "Yeah, that's it. Pity the ugly cripple. Feed soup to the basket case. Then what? Put a bag on his head so you can take him out for a walk and he won't frighten the neighborhood kiddies?"

"No, Xander, there are things. Things they can do. Jenny said her cousin lost a leg in Korea and the VA...."

Xander's head shot up. An expression of embarrassment warred with anger as he thought about Spike sitting and casually discussing his deformities over chocolate chip cookies. "Did she now? And did she say that the VA was going to make me a wooden eyeball or a rubber eardrum? The VA can't fix what's wrong with me, Spike, and I would appreciate you not talking about me behind my back. Now, I ate the fucking soup. Don't you
have somewhere to go?"

Spike nodded and rose to his feet. As usual he had gone too fast and too far, yet when he left the room it was with an empty bowl and a small speck of hope in his heart. Xander was right. He did have someplace to go. Several someplaces in fact.

Spike had a plan.

Part Seven

"This is a most unusual request. You know this is NOT our usual practice."

"Yes sir. I do, and I appreciate your consideration."

Spike sat in the straight-back, intentionally uncomfortable chair and waited for the paunchy, self-important man to bestow his decision. Spike
hoped for the resolution he had requested but if push came to shove, he was prepared to walk away empty handed. His mind wandered as the old fart spouted philosophical quotes from long-dead authors and expounded on his own schooling and lifelong accomplishments that held less than no interest for Spike.

Instead, Spike used the 'blah, blah, blah' time to scan the walls of dusty books and stare at the gilded nameplate that crowned the huge mahogany desk. The gold tag read: "Ethan Rayne, Dean of Studies."

"As I ponder this request, several factors come into play...."

Spike smiled and nodded while the old man continued. Inside, the boy was screaming for him to either yes or no the simple question and let him get the fuck out of there and back to Xander. Spike swallowed down the emotions as he recalled the look of hope and gratitude when he had handed Jessica the empty soup bowl. When he instructed her to fix a second bowl of the same, along with a
cup of jello for supper, she nodded and the expression of serious contemplation on her face would hint that she had been given plans for world domination.

"...and you do understand that, don't you?"

Spike blinked and realized that he had no idea what Mr. Rayne had just said.

"Well, I...."

"There is no negotiation on that point, William. You turn in all of the given assignments, on time, and through your father. If they are of passing grades, you will report here, IN PERSON, on the first of June to take your final exams. I am only considering this because we are so close to the end of the term and because of your father's position here at the university. This is a one-time deal, William. Don't think this can be repeated. If I allowed this sort of thing with other students, we would have anarchy. ANARCHY, William."
Spike wanted desperately to roll his eyes and pretend to shoot himself in the head. However, maturity had taught him restraint, and what he wanted in the long run surpassed his need for self-expression right now. With that in mind, he rose and extended his hand like an adult.

"Thank you sir. I will do my best and I appreciate your understanding."

The next hour was spent meeting with his professors and collecting assignments. He was pleasantly surprised to find that it wasn't all that much and mostly consisted of books and chapters to read, review work over the past semester's lessons and prep studies for the finals.

His next stop was home. His home. Their home despite the fact that Xander had never been there and possibly never would. The small one-bedroom flat that had housed all his hopes and dreams for the future. It was tiny. Spike preferred the word cozy. But had everything they needed.
He stood in the open area of the living room/dining room. There was a sofa, just the right size for cuddling, a chair and a television. All used. All freebies. All clean and arranged with love. He hurried into the bedroom and smoothed the blanket out on the double bed before tossing his suitcase onto it. He quickly shoved a few days' worth of clothes in and snapped it shut. He had paid the rent for the next thirty days, and after just quitting his part time job, he had no idea how to afford it after that.

But the flat was low on his list of priorities.

The last stop was the hardest. He needed to see his father and Jenny. As much as he wanted to pretend he was a self-sufficient grownup, he still needed their emotional support. He couldn't do this without it. So with his bag in the back seat of the car, Spike hurried into the house. It was already late afternoon and, as expected, Rupert was reading the paper. Jenny was in the kitchen and Dru was in the middle of the floor, running a toy truck over her baby doll's head. When she saw him, she jumped to
her feet.

"Pike! Pike!"

Rupert laid down his paper and sighed in exasperation as he corrected his daughter for the hundredth time.

"William, Drusilla. His name is William."

Dru stomped her flat little feet as she scowled and insisted, "Pike! Pike!"

Spike laughed and scooped her up. He growled and bent her backwards as he pretended to devour her fat neck wrinkles as she screamed, laughed and squirmed. The loud, raucous squeals brought a smiling Jenny from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a tea towel.

"Will. Are you here for supper? It's almost ready. Please say you'll stay."

Spike set Dru back on her feet and she scampered
away. When he straightened back up, his face had gone serious and his blue eyes darkened. "I can't." As briefly as possible, Spike explained the situation and immediately, his father expressed concerns.

"William, it's admirable that you want to help but these young men who are returning from the war, especially the damaged ones, need more than good intentions and love. They need professional care. If Xander is as ill as you believe, his parents should consider institu...."

"NO! No, Da, that isn't what he needs. He needs me. Or maybe I just need him, but either way, I have to try. It's like Xander is still lost in the jungle and I have to be an expedition to go find him and bring him out."

"I think he's right, Rupert. If Xander has any chance of a recovery, I think that chance lies with Will. We're proud of you William. Your father is concerned but we both support you one hundred percent. All we ask is that you call us every couple days or so and let us know how things are. And Will,
if it gets too intense, no one will fault you if you walk away or at least take a break. We don't want you lost in that jungle too."

Spike threw his arms around Jenny and hugged her tightly. He could hardly remember his own mother but he couldn't have asked for better than this. When his father stood and awkwardly held out his hand to shake, his son startled him by pulling him into a warm embrace that Rupert happily returned. Finally, reluctantly, he let go and stood back.

"I gotta go. I've already been gone longer than I planned and I still have one more stop to make. I promise I'll call. I love you both. Bye bye toad-girl."

Spike chuckled as Dru jumped to her feet and promptly fell on her butt as she waved her hands wildly and chanted, "Bye, bye, bye, bye."

Wasting no more time, Spike fired up the prized woody and he drove the three blocks to the State store. Luckily he knew the clerk, Willy, who would, despite Spike's age, sell him whatever he wanted.
Spike was no fool. He knew that alcohol was a big contributing factor in Xander's mental deterioration, but now was not the time to charge in there like Elmer Gantry and preach on the evils of the demon drink.

No, trust was the first step and Spike had promised that if Xander ate the soup, he could have the bottle. He had to follow through. With his purchase made, Spike was back in the car and heading for the Harris house. The jungle.

Xander's room was dark. He had pulled the curtains closed the minute he got home and he had no intention of opening them anytime soon. When Spike had left, it felt like a piece of Xander went with him. It magnified the unease that twitched beneath his skin and it accentuated the knowledge that he was alone. All alone.

But Spike had promised to come back. Hadn't he? When? How long had he been gone? Was it minutes? Hours, or maybe even days? Xander's brain tried to sort through the jumble of his
thoughts and put some order to his muddled mind. The small rational part reasoned that it was best that Spike was gone. He had seen the mess that was Xander Harris and he had walked away to begin his life with someone new.

The primitive, dominant area of his cerebellum cried pitifully, begging the blond to come back and save him. The hardest part of this internal conflict was Xander's recognition of it. He was just aware enough to understand. He was crazy. Insane. Fucking loony tunes.

He had paced the room for hours like a caged tiger. Waiting. Waiting for something that had no name.

Off in the distance of the street below, Xander heard a fire siren wail as it whizzed by, and he immediately dropped to a silent crouch. He tipped his head to aim his good ear toward the window and he waited to see if there was any danger. When the sound did not return, he crawled on his hands and knees over to where the curtain blocked out the real world and he scooted tightly against the
wall.

He then slowly, carefully raised his face as he peeled back the corner of the cheerful blue and green striped drapes, and he peered out with his only remaining eye. It was dusk. Late day. The time of preparation before the snipers began to slip through the jungles searching for a victim.

With slow caution, Xander returned the curtain to its exact position and he crawled into his nest. Spike was not coming back. He would have to remain concealed in his area until the safe light of day.

Xander picked up the last half-bottle of whiskey and he began to drink.

Part Eight
This time when he returned, Spike bolted up the steps and did not pause or hesitate when he reached the front door. He hurried in and was immediately met by Jessica's arms and Tony's hopeful gaze. It looked as though they had been sitting on pins and needles in the living room waiting on him. Pinning all their hopes for their son's redemption on the shoulders of one small Englishman.

Spike wavered slightly under the weight of their expectations then quickly recovered. If he was to do this, he had to stay strong, and they needed to understand the potential flaws in a plan this precarious.

"Look, I don't know what's going to happen and maybe Xander needs more than I have to give, but I need to try. I'm going to stay with him and just talk to him. I don't think he's fully home yet and I want him to know that, for him, the war is over. That's mentally. From what I can see, he's also in terrible physical shape so we need to get him eating. Fix foods that are easy to chew and digest and I'll get
him to eat. We can get him off the booze later."

Tony's eyes grew wide with shock and sorrow.

"He's drinking?"

Spike could have kicked himself. He hadn't been back more than five minutes and he was already screwing up. He had completely forgotten that Xander's parents were oblivious to his drunken state. Still, self-recrimination could come later. Time was short.

"Yeah, look, that isn't even important right now. Has he been out of that room at all since I left?"

Jessica dropped her face and shook her head. She had thought a dozen times of going up and trying to coax him out. Or maybe going in and sitting on his bed for a chat like they used to do. In the end, like a coward, she had done neither. Jessica glanced up the stairs toward the closed door. Spike followed her gaze and nodded.
"Okay, wait about an hour and bring us something to eat. Something light."

Then he turned. It was time to go challenge the lion in his den. Before he had taken one step, Tony pulled him into a tight embrace. Spike could feel the dampness seeping through the shoulder of his shirt as his 'dad' mumbled his thanks.

Quickly, Tony sniffed and put the mask of manhood back on his face. He then stepped back and watched as Spike clutched his things and bounded up the stairs. Tony had always wondered why Xander was the way he was. Why would any red-blooded boy choose to be with another guy when he could have any girl he wanted. It simply didn't seem logical.

Although he was not much of a church-goer, Tony Harris was a man who believed. Yet despite all the preachy sermons against this behavior, Tony had no doubts that this was right. God wasn't so stupid after all. Maybe he made people like Spike and Xander for just this sort of situation.
No woman could withstand this type of strain. It took someone strong. Someone resilient. Someone who had proven the strength of his love time after time. Spike was exactly what Xander needed. Yeah, Tony thought with a nod. God knows what the fuck he's doing.

This time when Spike approached the bedroom door, he stopped. He didn't want to scare Xander again so he knocked. Loudly enough for him to hear but not so hard as to seem threatening.

"Xan? Hey, it's me. I'm coming in."

There was no response, but Spike didn't expect one. He propped his overnighter up against the wall and shifted all his schoolwork up under his arm. The whiskey bottle was tucked into his pocket. He wanted both his hands free just in case. Cautiously, he turned the knob and the door creaked open.

The room was dim from the fading light of day and the closed curtains. Beyond that, everything
seemed much the same as when he left. Only worse. More clutter. More damage. A stronger smell of funk.

As Spike's eyes adjusted to the lack of light, he scanned the room and the silence for the occupant. Focusing on the area of the far right corner, he finally picked up a fractional movement and the outline of a body sitting, waiting. Watching. It was spooky as fuck and caused the hair on the back of Spike's neck to spring up. Slowly, Spike took a step forward. "Xan?"

That one spoken work was the pin-prick that popped the bubble of suspense hanging thickly in the air. With a snort, Xander's hand came from behind him and the bottle was lifted to his lips. He took a swallow and waited for Spike's next move.

The time spent on this initial exchange gave Spike's eyes a moment to adjust and he could now see more clearly. He was certain that this extended state of darkness was only making Xander's depression worse and he resolved to open the
curtains tomorrow and bring in some light. For now, he needed to settle in and establish some ground rules.

"Well now, in consideration of your lovely invitation, I have decided to accept and will be staying with you for a while."

Xander scowled. His brow wrinkled as he tried to remember and recall any invitation he had extended beyond the hospitable request that Spike go fuck himself. "I NEVER asked you...."

Immediately, the smirk on Spike's lips told Xander he had been suckered. Spike had conned him into responding and he had been foolish enough to fall for it. With a deep rumbling growl, Xander sealed his lips together and he glared. The gauntlet had been thrown down and the next time, Xander would be ready. Score one for the intruder.

Spike couldn't help but grin at his first small victory, yet he didn't want this to become a pissing contest. Not unless he was sure he could win. "You didn't?
Oh, well possibly I misunderstood. No matter. I'm here now so I might as well stay. Since I'm going to be here for an indeterminate length of time, I have brought my school work with me. For a couple hours during the day, I will need to complete my assignments. I thought your desk would work nicely. Would you mind clearing it off for me?"

Spike stood in the center of the room with his arms beginning to cramp from the weight of the books and study materials. Xander made no move to comply. Instead, he sat right where he was with the angry 'fuck you' expression firmly in place. To put a period on his intentions, Xander took one more swig from the bottle and he waited to see how many times Spike would ask.

The answer was, apparently just once. Spike huffed. "I see. All righty then."

Casually strolling over to the desk, Spike gave one wide sweep of his arm. Every paper, torn picture, empty bottle, and the small mound of smelly, dirty
clothes flew through the air, and in a blink the desktop was cleared. Xander's eyebrows shot upward as Spike calmly laid his books out in a neat organization.

"Perfect."

Xander tipped his head to the side, curious to see what would happen next. His hand drifted up to touch and assure himself that his eye patch was securely in place. It was an action that he repeated unconsciously a hundred times a day. It was a habit Spike found irritating.

Xander watched as Spike fucking around with the books as he sang the Mr. Ed theme song. After the third loop, he wished that he was turned in the other direction so that his dead ear would prevent him from hearing again that a horse is a horse of course of course and no one can talk to a horse of course.

That is of course unless that horse is the famous Mr. Ed.
Finally, the chorus completed, Spike cocked the small, straight-backed desk chair to the side and he sat down facing directly toward the nest and the angry young man sitting there.

"All right. Now it is time to come to some understandings and set some ground rules. First, I'm staying. This is Mom and Dad's house and they have graciously invited me. Since I am their guest, you can't throw me out. (The stuck-out tongue was clearly implied here.) Second, I can't live in squalor so we are going to clean this pig-sty up. Third, you stink. I don't mean just a bit of funk, I mean you really stink. We're talking poo pit in an outhouse. We're talking elephant's graveyard in the African sun. We're talking...."

"HEY! I may be crazy but I still have feelings here!"

Spike chuckled. That was just the reaction he had hoped for.

"Oh, sorry. I got a bit carried away. Anyway, suffice
to say, you smell. So while I work on this garbage dump of a room, you're going to take a bath, put on some clean underwear, brush your teeth and wash your hair."

Xander continued to glare at Spike with an expression that questioned which of them really was bordering on insanity. "Anything else, Master?"

Spike smiled sweetly but the serious look in his eyes told Xander that he meant every word of what he was saying.

"Yes. Mom is not your maid or your waitress. There is no good reason why she has to schlep up and down those steps with your fucking meals on a tray and serve you like a king. You lost an eye but your fucking legs work just fine. Starting tomorrow morning, we are going to go downstairs for breakfast."

Xander's jaw dropped and fear flooded his brain. He wanted to cry and beg for understanding. He knew eventually he would have to do it. Just not yet. He
wasn't ready yet. He needed time. He wondered how Spike could be so mean. Didn't he love Xander at all any more? He knew one thing for sure. Spike was enjoying this way too much.

While all of this rushed around Xander's brain, he sat, silently staring at his torturer.

The bastard, Spike.

Part Nine

"Why the fuck are you doing this?"

Xander stood by the bedroom door as per instruction. After two years of strict compliance, the Army had him trained to hop-to when an order was given. It was apparently a hard habit to break and Xander found himself responding despite his resolution not to cooperate. So, he slumped angrily
as he watched Spike root through his duffle bag and drag out his last clean pair of boxers and government-issued undershirt.

For a few minutes, he thought Spike would not answer his question, and frankly it wasn't important if he did or not. Xander already knew the answer. This was a pity trip. Because of their past relationship, Spike felt obligated to help the crazy, crippled freak. As soon as Xander was better, or Spike got a really good look at the horror that was Xander's face and body, Spike would move on to someone else and Xander would again be alone.

"I'm doing this because I love you and I don't intend to see you become one of the throwaways that return from that cursed war. You are a good man, Xander, and more importantly, you are MY good man. Now let's get your stinking arse into the bath."

Xander touched his eye patch and he turned his face away. Spike's words were nice and fluffy but they were pointless. He was not Spike's man. Not anymore. He wasn't even his own man. He was
nothing. He was half. Still, he followed orders and gripped the clean clothes as Spike led the way down the hall to the bath.

As they passed the landing, Xander's eye darted nervously toward the stairway. Facing his parents was the last thing he wanted to do right now and the short trek down the hall left him out in the open and vulnerable. He hurried to catch up.
"I told you. We aren't together anymore. I'm not the same. We aren't the same. I told you yesterday. Fuck off, Spike."

Spike breezed into the bathroom. Xander's words didn't cut or even scratch him. There was no heat or conviction behind them and the tone was unconvincing. So he pretended not to hear. He placed the clean underwear on the end of the sink and he retrieved a lime green towel and a fresh bar of soap. Xander watched nervously as his hand drifted up and brushed over the patch.

The bathroom was bright. Blindingly so. When Spike had flipped the switch that lit up the room, Xander
visibly flinched. He glanced around at all the things he remembered growing up with. It was all still the same. The yellow walls. The green throw rugs. The sunflowers on the soap dish. The three colorfully painted, smiling fish that hung on the walls. The huge, monstrously gigantic mirror over the sink. Jesus fucking Christ. He couldn't remember the damn thing being that big. There was no fucking way on earth to be in that damn room and not see yourself in that mirror.

He reached over and snapped off the light. Spike, who was in the process of wedging the little rubber stopper in the bathtub drain, stopped and slowly straightened up. Without a word, he stepped over and flipped it back on. Xander scowled and lifted his hand only to be told, "Leave the goddamn thing alone!"

"It's too bright."

"It is not."

For three beats of time, no one moved. Xander
stood with his hand perched a few inches from the switch and Spike remained by the tub with his fists on his hips and a warning in his eyes. Finally, Xander's hand slowly lowered and he turned away. Another small win for Spike who smiled and calmly cranked the hot water spigot open to start the fill. "That's better. Okay, then. Take off your unders, which will probably need to be burned, and climb on in."

Xander's mouth dropped open in stark disbelief. "Not with you in here. I am not getting naked in front of you. If you want me to take a bath, you have to leave."

That one hurt. It was a rejection that blindsided Spike and took him completely by surprise. It was not one he would acquiesce to without an explanation. "Why? I've seen you naked a thousand times."

"Well you aren't seeing me naked today or ever again."
"Why?"

"Because. That's why."

Spike made no move toward the door and in matching his challenge, Xander made no advance toward the tub of clean, steamy water. Suddenly, with a shifting dart of Spike's eyes up and down on Xander's body, his expression transformed from resolve to horrified concern. "Oh God, Xan. Was your.... Did the accident...?"

"What?"

Spike's forefinger slowly crept up and waggled in the direction of Xander's crotch. "Is everything still.... I mean does it work?"

"WHAT? Fuck yes it works! Christ on cornbread! What the fuck kind of question is that?"

Spike immediately returned to indignant as he crossed his arms over his chest while the swampy heat from the tub threatened to have Spike's
underarms smelling like Xander's.

"Well excuse the fuck out of me! You were acting like it got shot off or sommtin."

Xander had maxed out. He needed silence. He needed that constant yammering to stop or he might just explode into a million pieces and the condition of his dick would be the last thing of concern in the room.

Grabbing the doorknob, Xander stood back and shouted, "Get out!" With a huff of disgust at his boyfriend's childish, obstinate behavior, Spike stepped just outside the bathroom.

"Fine. I'm out. Take your damn bath alone but don't you dare lock that...."

SLAM!

CLICK!

The second he had flipped the door lock, Xander
grinned and danced back as he shadowboxed a few wild punches toward the closed, secured door and the loser on the other side. Score one for the Xanman! He was suddenly flush with exhilaration at the victory, small as it may be. Then, when he spun around with delight, he caught a brief glimpse of himself in the mirror and just as quickly as it arrived, the moment passed and he was back to himself.

With a sad sigh, he removed his clothes and eyepatch before easing into the too-hot water.

"Ooohhh, hell yes."

Immediately, his body relaxed as he groaned at the wonderful feeling. He couldn't remember the last hot, private bath he had had. Small clouds of steam rose from the surface as his muscles slowly unlocked, his mind cleared and the tension seeped away.

Bending his knees, Xander gazed at his scrawny legs and he watched them turn pink from the heat. He then looked at the limp dick that bobbed and
floated on the surface and he snorted. "Damaged my ass. Fucking thing works just fine, thank you. Just doesn't want to, that's all."

Xander poked at it with his fingertip. It rolled with the small waves in the water and it bumped lazily against the inside of his thigh. Xander sighed and cursed its lack of ambition, finally deciding, *Oh, well, maybe I'll feel like spanking it later.*

For now, he had a bath to take. Not because he had been ordered to. Certainly not! He was through being told what to do. No, he had a bath to take because although his hearing was damaged and one of his eyes was gone, his nose was working just fine and the smell that was rising on the fog of steam was enough to gag a maggot.

So Xander began to wash.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike busied himself in their room. He collected all
the dirty laundry and bedding and he piled it outside in the hallway. He grabbed the waste-paper can from the corner and stuffed the torn poster, papers and pictures into it, sadly noting that most of the pictures were of the two of them during much happier times. He continually told himself not to take these things personally because Xander was reacting to his hurt, but it was hard. The question haunting him most was, what if Xander got better and still didn't want Spike in his life? It was a prospect that made Spike physically sick. So he kept busy and refused to ponder it.

Every few minutes, Spike would pop his head out of the room and listen in the direction of the bathroom. He was tempted to go knock and see if Xander needed any help but it was a temptation he resisted. Xander did not need coddling and belittling. He was still a man and should be shown the respect a man in his situation rightly deserved.

Still, he wondered if Xander needed any help.

With a hushed, whispered conspiratorial hallway
meeting that would have made James Bond proud, Spike and Jessica met and discussed food, bedding, baths and supplies. She promised herself to say a prayer of thanks tonight for Spike's take-charge attitude and for her son's seeming compliance. As she listened and made mental notes, a stirring began deep down in her heart. It felt like hope. Dear God, it felt like hope.

And time dragged on.

The room was clean. The bed was made for him and the sheets and blankets in the nest were fresh and crisp. Supper was sitting on Spike's school desk cooling and Spike was becoming concerned. Xander had been in there an exorbitant length of time. The only thing that prevented Spike from kicking the door off its hinges and charging in was the now-and-then creak of the bathroom floorboards that told him Xander was out of the bath and moving around.

Then, suddenly, there he was.
Standing in the doorway.

Spike was speechless. He was thinner and of course he still wore that damned eyepatch, but he was Xander. He was Xander. He was clean, his dark hair was slicked back, wet and shiny, and he stood with that slight tilt to the right that Spike always remembered. But the surprising part, the best part, was his face. He had shaved off that scruffy three-day growth of beard, and with his skin scrubbed clean Spike realized that the scarring beneath his missing eye was not nearly as pronounced as it had appeared. What had looked like deep ruts were really dirty tear tracks.

His heart ached to rush to him. It felt so much like old times that Spike's body screamed at him to throw his arms around his man and cling to him, forcing him to forget the last two years and turning back the clock to a time when there were no doubts between them.

Spike's face beamed. His eyes sparkled and he took a step forward. "Oh, God! Xander, you look
wonderful!"

For a fast moment, Xander was flushed with the warmth of pride at the expression of approval and acceptance on Spike's face. Then he caught himself and he scowled. He would not be suckered in that easily. "Yeah, sure I do. Look good enough to go fill out a job application for circus side show freak, don't I?"

Spike's mood burst. His shoulders dropped as he rolled his eyes and turned away.

Part Ten

"You are such a bloody dick-head."

"What? What did you say?"

Spike had intentionally spoken in the direction of
Xander's deaf side, knowing he wouldn't be able to hear but gaining immense satisfaction from telling him just what he thought of his bratty behavior.

"I said, our supper is getting cold so sit down and eat the fucking thing."

Xander pouted and studied Spike's face for a hint of the truth. He would bet money that an invitation to dinner was not what the blond had just mumbled but at this point, an argument and a demand for clarification would go nowhere. And besides, Xander was surprisingly hungry.

Supper was eaten in near silence but it wasn't a tense or uncomfortable silence. It was a calm. A quiet. It was a time for Spike to sit near Xander and really look at him. Yesterday, Spike had told his father that Xander, his Xander, was gone and there was a stranger in his place. An angry, dangerous stranger that had nothing in his heart but hate and fury. Now that Spike had spent time with the ex-soldier, he could see that nothing was further from the truth.
It wasn't hate and anger that ruled Xander's heart, it was fear. It was insecurity that continually drove his fingertips to reassure himself that the patch still concealed the ugliness of his missing eye. And it was doubt that ate away at his soul when he looked at the blond and questioned his love and devotion. It was no wonder, Spike realized, that Xander was an emotional and mental mess. The damage the war had done went far beyond his physical wounds.

Finally, with a sigh and a smile, Spike sat back in his chair and he rubbed his flat tummy as though it were huge and bloated. "Oh, dear. I am stuffed. The soup was wonderful and the salad and rolls were the perfect touch. Remember the mountains of greasy foods we used to shovel in down at the Chatterbox? I fear my constitution would now revolt if I tried to consume such colon-wrenching cuisine. I guess we all change with age."

Xander focused his eye on Spike as he scraped the last noodles from the bottom of his bowl. He wanted to tell Spike that it wasn't true. He hadn't
changed a bit since that summer three years ago when they first met. Spike was still beautiful, flawless, and innocent of the realities of the world. His eyes were still blue. His smile was still sweet. He was still every bit the Spike that Xander had fallen so deeply in love with.

He wanted to laugh and recall all the silliness of their early days of sexual exploration together. He wanted so badly to reach over and touch him, kiss him and tumble together in an embrace of passion and love.

Most of all, he just wanted to be Xander again.

When all those emotions and thoughts slammed through him, Xander snapped. Without any forewarning or indication, he grabbed his empty soup bowl up and he leapt to his feet. Then with a roar of pain and anguish he threw it as hard as he could, causing it to shatter into a million shards against the wall by the doorway.

Spike's body snapped with the quick flush of
adrenalin. His heart pounded in his chest and the fast slam of fear left him shaky and charged as his primitive instinct for fight or flight evaluated the options.

Instantly reacting, Spike ducked and covered his head with his arms as an unmanly squeak left his lips. He cringed and braced himself against an expected physical assault and planned his escape as soon as possible. And he waited. And waited. But nothing further happened.

Cautiously, with his heartbeat still hammering out an SOS against his ribs, he lifted his head and opened his eyes. Xander was curled up in his nest with his face to the wall. Spike glanced back over his shoulder and evaluated the damage. Apparently, the only one who suffered was the soup bowl.

Puffing out a weak chuckle, he rose on trembling legs. "Well, apparently supper is over." With nothing more to say, he took the waste paper can over and he cleaned up the broken pottery, all the time staring at the doorway and wondering if this
wouldn't be an excellent time to bail out.

Xander gave no indication that he was awake or aware and his fury seemed to have ebbed as quickly as it flared.

When the mess was cleared away, Spike placed all the other eating items back on the tray and he set them in the hall. He then sadly returned to the desk and he spread out his schoolwork hoping that concentrating on facts and figures would push his present situation into the background and bring him a small reprieve.

The sun was setting. It dipped the already dim room into darkness and Spike snapped on the gooseneck lamp that sat on the desk. The only sound in the room was the scratching of his pencil as he took notes and jotted down information.

"Do you ever see her?"

Spike's hand stopped and his head lifted. He stared into the dark corner and the unmoving lump that
laid there as he tried to determine who the hell Xander could be asking about, considering they hadn't spoken since supper's abrupt end nearly two hours ago.

"Do I ever see who?"

Spike watched as the shadowed figure rolled over so that he rested on his bad-ear side. When he spoke again, the one word that left his mouth came on a wave of anguish and pain. It was struggled and foreign sounding as though it hadn't been said in ages. It was whispered and harsh.

"Cordelia."

That word and the tone that delivered it spoke volumes. It told Spike a story of regret and shame. It was another component to Xander's suffering that Spike had never considered. It was one that maybe Spike could put to rest.

Spike laid down his pencil and he turned. Although he could not see Xander's face, he knew Xander
could see his in the small yellow circle of light given off by the lamp, and he wanted to make sure that Xander read the honesty and sincerity there.

"Yes. I used to see her all the time. When you two first left, we had a sort of girls' night out every Friday. We would go to the Chatterbox or the movies. When school started, we both went to the university. We didn't take the same courses, and after a while we kind of drifted off into different circles but, yeah, we stayed close."

"Used to see her? Won't she talk to you anymore?"

"What? Why wouldn't she.... I don't see her anymore because she moved away right after....She needed to go. She wanted to try her hand at acting so she moved to LA. Last I heard she was working for a detective agency out there while she goes to auditions."

Xander snorted with disgust. "Just like that? Just forget everyone and move on with your life?"
"What would you have her do, Xander? Cry all the time? Let me tell you something, she did her fair share of that. Or maybe she should just crawl into a nest in the corner of her room, turn out the lights and stop living?"

The only response from the corner was silence and Spike felt his ire slip away. When he spoke again, his voice was calmer. Xander needed understanding not arguments. Maybe explaining what had happened after they got the news would fill in the blanks that Xander's mind had drawn his own conclusions to.

"After we got the news of the accident, we all got together. Mom, Dad, Cordy, me and Riley's family. We talked and cried all through the night. I know in situations like this there is something called survivor's guilt but believe me, Xander, no one blames you for living, and the only one we all blamed for Riley's death was the Cong that planted the land mine."

Spike paused and heard the sniffle of quiet crying.
He thought about stopping but decided that he should go on.

"Cordy stayed at Riley's house while all the arrangements were made and she was Betty Finn's rock. She did it all. The cooking and cleaning. Answering the calls and writing the notes. And when no one was looking, her heart broke. Cordy may have had a schoolgirl crush on you, but her love for Riley was the real thing. The service was private. It was military. Dignified but loving. Cordy was in the front row. After that, we all watched as the days went by and she sank deeper and deeper into a depression. Finally, it was Betty who told her to go, and we all agreed. Cordy needed to find a new life. She deserves to live. We all do, Xander. You included."

With that, Xander rolled back over and the sound of wrenching sobs filled the air. Sorrow hung heavily in the room as Spike switched off the light. He stripped off his clothes and he crawled, alone, into Xander's bed where he tossed and turned as he wrestled with the doubts and frustrations in his
After nearly two hours, the crying had slowed and stopped. Spike laid and listened as Xander's breathing evened out and just as he assumed his soldier had fallen asleep, a voice, weak and cracked, spoke in the darkness.

"Spike?"

"Yes?"

"Can you save me?"

"I don't know, Xan, but I'm sure gonna try."

**Part Eleven**

Spike rolled over and stretched his legs out as far as he could to give his muscles a bit of a morning burn. Even though the room was starved for cheerful sunlight, Spike felt as comfortable as if he were in his small flat across town. Over the past two years he had slept in Xander's bed as often as his own and it was like a second home to him.
As his mind slowly came awake, he took the time to reassess the situation and decide on some priorities. When they had dozed off last night, Xander seemed more accepting and compliant. That should make things easier than if he were still acting like the foul-mouthed jerk he had been earlier.

Thinking about Xander caused Spike to roll over and face the corner nest. The curtain that hung at the window was framed on all sides by the glorious golden sunlight that was begging to be allowed to illuminate the room. Even considering its restrictive blockage, enough light seeped in to make seeing easy.

Xander was wide awake.

He was sitting cross-legged in the corner of the room, in his nest, still wearing only his stark white government underwear. His hands were in his lap, his back was ramrod straight and he glared silently at Spike.
It was eerie and for a brief second Spike felt the terror of small rabbit who was locked in the predatory sights of a jungle cat. The fine hairs rose and prickled all over his body as he stared into one, dark, focused eye. Neither man spoke and all the air seemed to be sucked from the room.

Reason fought for dominance over fear in Spike's brain as he repeatedly told himself, 'This is Xander. This is Xander,' and the moment stretched on. Finally, Spike recognized the situation for what it was. A challenge. A test. An evaluation of the conditions and of Spike himself. It was also an opportunity for Spike to establish himself. If Xander thought he could frighten his boyfriend into screaming like a girl and running away, he was sorely mistaken.

Spike calmly broke eye contact. Then, with an overly exaggerated yawn and a stretch, he casually flipped back the covers and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Xander blinked, tipped his head slightly with curiosity and his body fractionally relaxed.
"Good morning, Xander. I hope you slept well. I know I slept like a log. I never have understood that analogy. Does a log really sleep? I have never heard one snore, however, what is the age old question? If a log snores in the forest when no one is around, does it really make a sound?"

Xander's face screwed up in a mask of confusion and disgust. "What the fuck are you babbling on about? Who the fuck gives a shit about trees and snoring forests and...HEY! What the hell are you...?"

But it was too late. Before Xander could scramble to his feet and stop him, Spike had given two flamboyant jerks on each curtain, and immediately the room was flooded with light and warmth and what appeared to be a stray beam of hope.

Cheerfully, Spike stood directly in front of the window. He closed his eyes, smiled and let the heat bounce through the panes of glass and touch him with the memories of a thousand California mornings they had spent together.
In stark contrast, Xander stood with his back wedged as far into his corner as possible as he sought to avoid any contact with the illuminating beams of light that had invaded his personal space. He whimpered and cowered from the truths that the light would reveal. And he stared at Spike. Standing in the glow of the sun, Spike still took his breath away. He was more beautiful than anything celestial.

A quiet tear rolled down his cheek as his heart swelled with the love he tried desperately to deny. Spike. He was still so young and perfect. Innocent and flawless. He was the exact opposite of all the ugly and terrible things that Xander had become and this fucking, vile sunlight served to accentuate that polar opposition. There was nowhere to hide. No shadow to crouch in.

"Shut those goddam...!"

"Nope. It's a beautiful morning and I intend to enjoy it. Besides, we aren't going to be in here long."
There's a lot to do before breakfast."

Xander's eye darted curiously toward the closed bedroom door and back to Spike. Before he could ask, Spike answered. "Nope. Mom isn't hauling your food up here today. She's fixing us a lovely breakfast of pancakes and sausages down in the kitchen. Since it's after eight, Dad has already gone to work so it will just be us and Mom but I think that will be nice, don't you?"

Spike waited for the screaming objections. He hoped by mentioning that only one parent would be present, Xander wouldn't feel ganged up on and it might be a slight incentive for venturing out of this depressing room that was akin to a prison cell.

The confusing inner conflict of his stomach demanding said pancakes and sausage versus his need to stay in his safe zone actually took his mind off the fact that Spike was staring directly into his damaged face. Eventually, his stomach won out. "I.... Can't Mom just...."
"No, she can't."

"Well, I don't.... I mean...."

Spike sighed with relief. Xander's indecision was as good as an agreement. "All right then. I need to run to the loo for a fast morning pee and a quick wash-up. I assume that since only one of us is sporting a morning woody, that you have already done so. While I take care of business, you need to straighten up your bedding and put on some pants."

At the mention of his limp dick, Xander scowled and cupped his hands over his crotch. At the same time, his eye darted down toward Spike's and he noticed that yes, one of them certainly was tenting. And it wasn't a pup tent. It was huge. It was more of a gunner's tent. It was thick and it pressed against Spike's boxers shamelessly.

In a flash, the vivid memory of a day three years ago came flooding back to him. The recollection of the two of them standing just like this in Spike's bedroom. A time when Xander was coming into his
own understanding. A day when the sun flooded the room and glowed around the magnificence of Spike's nude form. Much later, Xander would look back on that day as the moment that the first spark of his love for Spike had started to grow.

Then the reality slammed into him. That was then and this is now. That time was gone. Forever. Xander knew he was no longer young or innocent. He was ugly. He was spoiled. And worse, he had lost his entitlement to be in love. The world was a hellmouth and he had been sucked into it and spit back out.

He suddenly felt furious. Spike was mocking him. Standing there to be looked at, and smirking at Xander with his arrogant, smug perfection. Knowing that he was still whole and Xander was not. Flaunting himself. Taunting.

"Get out! Go take your fucking piss but get the fuck out of my room!"

Spike took a step back and wondered what the hell
had just happened. He thought things were leaning towards better, and now somehow he had made them worse and upset Xander again. Spike threw his arms in the air and shook his head in frustration. Before he left the room, he pointed at Xander's old dresser and his voice left no doubt that this was an order.

"Ten minutes. Find a pair of your old jeans and put them on with a tee. I expect you to be dressed and ready."

"Fuck you! I'll do what I want. You aren't the boss of me!"

Spike stomped from the room and purposefully left the door stand wide open. If Xander wanted it shut, let him do it himself.

Several minutes later, Spike returned. He had not hurried. He needed some alone time. Some thinking time. He wasn't surprised to find the bedroom door again closed. In fact, he half expected it to be locked but, with a sigh of relief, the knob turned easily in
his hand. When he entered the room, he found Xander standing exactly where Spike had left him. He had the same scowl on his face and the same obstinate, defiant air about him.

Except that he was dressed.

He had done as he was told and he now wore a pair of very oversized jeans that hung off his thin frame and a Beach Boys tee that used to be one of Xander's favorites. Dressed in the clothes that used to make him look so buff and sexy, now it only served to make him appear even more pathetic. Spike longed to throw his arms around him. To pull him into a loving embrace and tell him that none of this mattered. That Xander was still his heart and his soul, but he knew he couldn't. Touching was prohibited.

"Okay, great. Well, I don't know about you but I'm starved and Mom is probably wondering what the hell is keeping us, so, after you."

Spike swung the door wide open and he stood to
the side, implying that Xander should lead the way. Xander didn't move. An expression of indecision flickered across his face. He licked his lips. He blinked.

"Xander? Come on. Mom's waiting and I'm hungry. Aren't you hungry?"

Xander could feel the control of his life again being snatched away. When he signed the release papers in the Saigon hospital, he promised himself that no man would ever again take charge of his life again, yet it seemed like that was what Spike was doing. He needed something. Some way to hold on to himself. Some solid stance. He needed a fucking drink.

Xander marched over to his nest and he grabbed up his whiskey bottle and took a long full, swallow. He then swiped his forearm across his lips and he slammed the cork back in.

"I need another bottle."
"You still have a half...."

"I said I need another bottle! If you want my fucking cooperation, it's on my fucking terms. AND I SAID I NEED ANOTHER FUCKING BOTTLE!"

Spike crossed his arms over his chest as he rose to the challenge of the negotiation. "Fine. Da is stopping by later to pick up my schoolwork and I'll have him go get it. In exchange, you have to agree to eat all meals downstairs."

Xander rolled the terms over in his mind. It wasn't a win but it wasn't a loss. It was a compromise. He could live with a compromise. For now.

Part Twelve

Jessica fussed around the kitchen nervously. She tried to calm her jangled nerves by telling herself
that this was Xander. Her Xander. Her baby boy. But the fact was that he really wasn't anymore. Her baby, that is. He was a man full grown. A man who had shouldered the weight of war on his back and seen things that no boy should ever have to see.

And now he felt like a stranger. It was the one thing Jessica would have sworn could never happen. Her son was a stranger to her. But that didn't diminish the love she carried in her heart for him. That would never change. No war could take that.

Intermittently, she would go to the bottom of the stairs and she would strain for any sound of movement that would indicate her boys were awake. When Spike had promised her that he and Xander would be downstairs for breakfast, it had thrilled her more than winning a washer on Queen for a Day. She had kissed his cheek and suggested pancakes and sausage.

It had been two hours since Tony had left for work and she began her vigil. When the sound of scuffling feet and a flushing from a bathroom finally signaled
their activities, she all but fell over her own feet as she ran back to the kitchen to begin the prep work. Her hands shook as she tied on her apron, and she couldn't remember how much milk it took for her famous flapjacks.

When the door to the kitchen suddenly swung open and Spike breezed in with an overly chirpy "Morning, Mom," she whirled around, letting out a squeak as an egg flew from her hand and hit the floor with a 'splat.'

"Oh, shoot, darn."

Xander stood back and watched silently as the two of them hustled around with a dishrag and a sponge. Spike scooped up the slimy, wiggly egg yolk while his mother sponged and wiped the linoleum. When the catastrophic incident appeared to be corrected, Jessica straightened up and then turned in Xander's direction.

The expression on her face was an odd one that Xander had trouble interpreting. It felt peculiar. He
still loved her but suddenly he had no idea what to say to her. He wanted to reassure her. To tell her that everything would be all right but the truth was, he never had lied to his mother and he hated to start now.

When the silence threatened to create a floundering calamity, Spike jumped in. "Well, here we are and we are hungry as a skinny cat on a tuna boat. Aren't we, Xan?"

Xander ducked his head as his hand brushed over the patch. He squirmed uncomfortably at being the focus of attention.

"Um, yeah, I guess so."

Jessica smoothed back a stray hair and she chuckled uneasily. "Good. Good. Well, that's, um, good! Why don't you boys go on in and have a seat at the table and your yummy breakfast will be right up."

"Can we help?"
"NO! I mean, no, that isn't necessary. Scoot. Scoot."

Spike followed orders and he pushed and nudged Xander back out through the door and into the dining room. He pointed to a chair and indicated Xander should sit and stay. Spike sat on his right, always mindful of Xander's hearing restrictions, and he leaned in speaking clearly and quietly.

"Now listen. Mom is working hard on this and I want you to stop acting like a prick. I don't expect you to bubble like a fairy-fucking-princess but at least stop scowling so much. You aren't the only one having a hard time, you know."

Xander's head snapped up and he looked Spike squarely in the eye as the outrage of indignation boiled just below his skin.

"Oh, well, excuse the fuck out of me if my freakish missing body parts are causing you and my parents discomfort. Maybe I should just put a fucking doghouse in the back yard and move out there so no one has to look at me. Would that satisfy...."
"Here we are!"

Jessica breezed through the swinging door and stopped dead in her tracks at the look of intensity between her boys. She hesitated, uncertain what to do with the huge platter of hot food in her hands and wondering if she should simply back out the way she came in. Immediately, Spike jumped up with a calm smile on his face and he took the tray from her and set it on the table as though nothing had happened.

"Oh, hell, that smells wonderful. Doesn't it, Xan? I'll bet you can't remember the last time you had real buttermilk pancakes. Oh, and look. She even fixed those little sausages you always loved. Remember how you used to call them piggies?"

Xander frowned. He hated to admit, but it did smell amazing. His stomach growled and his mouth watered. He hadn't seen pancakes and sausage in over a year, but somehow admitting that felt like a concession.
"I had pancakes all the time in Saigon and I ain't never called them 'piggies'."

Spike just rolled his eyes and loaded up his plate before slapping two pancakes and two piggies on his disgruntled companion's. He then all but turned his back on Xander and launched into a conversation of false normalcy that would put Jessica at ease.

They talked about the upcoming garden club rose festival and how Jessica thought her yellow miniatures would fare. He asked about how the USO fundraiser was going and if she wanted him to take her to Center City for the regional's next month.

All this time, Xander sat sullenly. He picked at his food and he slowly ate small bites. He would have loved to just dive in and inhale it the way he used to but he knew his stomach was still too sensitive and shrunken to consider such a foolish endeavor.
He listened as Spike and his mother talked, and he was surprised at the level of jealousy that was stirring within him. Jealous of their close affection. Jealous of their easy, relaxed normalcy. The only thing he couldn't quite pinpoint was which of them he was most envious of. The one thing he knew for certain was that he was the outsider here. They had gone on with their lives without him and clearly didn't need him now.

Angrily, Xander shoved away his half-eaten breakfast. It was an abrupt action that caught Spike's attention and halted his long speech about his problems with his geometry class at the university.

"You're through? You don't want any more? That's a lot of food to waste."

Quickly, Jessica jumped to her feet and she removed Xander's plate. "No, that's all right. I probably made too much. No problem. I'll just dump the rest in the trash. It doesn't matter."
Suddenly Xander looked up at her and, in a startling and unexpected move, he slapped his palms down sharply on the table top. "It DOES matter. Do you know how many good people are starving every day? You throw out enough food to feed an entire village and act like it doesn't mean anything. We eat and eat and grow fat while children starve to death and you think it doesn't matter?"

Jessica stood in stunned silence. The tears welled up in her eyes and Spike feared that coming down here was his mistake. Maybe it was too soon. One thing was certain. Whatever the underlying cause of Xander's fury, Spike would not let him vent it on his mother. That was too far over the line.

"XANDER! STOP IT! Apologize to Mom right now. You have no right...."

Xander, too, leapt to his feet and he loomed over Spike as the air between them crackled. "MOM? Newsflash, Spike. She is NOT your Mom. She's mine. You don't have one. Remember?"
Jessica gasped. She had never heard anything hurtful come from her son's mouth, and the fact that such venom and hate was directed at her and Spike was simply heart-wrenching.

The quiet sound his mother made was like a slap across Xander's face that startled him back to his senses. Immediately he whimpered as he took a step back and stumbled. His chair fell backwards and he tripped over his feet in an effort to get away from the table. He then rushed for the stairway where he stopped. With his head lowered in shame, he mumbled, "I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean.... I'm sorry."

With that, he darted up the stairs and they heard the door slam. It took only two beats of hesitation before Spike was on his feet and hot on Xander's trail. As he passed, Jessica put a hand on his arm.

"Wait, Spike. Please don't...."

"No, Mom, this is bullshit. He is NOT going to treat you like that."
Rushing up the stairs, Spike grabbed for the doorknob. He had already resolved that if it was locked, he would kick it open. Luckily, that wasn't necessary. It turned without protest and he stomped in. This time he didn't care how loud he got.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Xander was all but hyperventilating. His fists were balled up at his sides and his body quivereded with rage as the tears streamed unchecked down his face.

"You want to know what's wrong with me? Fine. I'll tell you. YOU! That's what's wrong with me. For two fucking years I was ordered about and talked to like a dog. Then you want to come here, UNINVITED, and treat me the same way! FUCK. OFF. Stop treating me like an blithering idiot and stop talking to me like I'm dirt under your feet! Go the fuck away!!"
Spike blinked as all the anger rushed out of him with a giant whoosh of comprehension. Xander was right. He was absolutely right. Spike had gone about this all wrong. In his effort not to let Xander feel like an invalid, Spike had been too harsh and unfeeling. Xander needed compassion and kindness, not a whip and a chair. Spike had been the one acting like a prick, not Xander.

"Shit. You're right, Xan. I'm sorry."

"What?"

"I said, you are right. I've been an arse. I'm sorry. If you let me, I'd like to try again."

Xander was dumbfounded by the rapid switching of train tracks. His hand brushed over his eye patch then he scratched his head in thought and confusion. "Oh, well...."

"Tell you what, how about if I put my schoolwork to the side for a while. Don't you still have a deck of cards in your dresser drawer? Why don't you and I
have a rousing game of spades?"

Xander blinked and looked between Spike and the dresser. "Yeah, they're still there. Can I take off my pants and sit in my boxers?"

Spike laughed. "You can do whatever the fuck you want to, Xan."

Part Thirteen

They played for hours.

Deal and fold. Win and lose. Hand after hand the cards slapped down on the small desk as the points were scratched in one column or the other on the back of a scrap piece of paper. Somewhere around the tenth hand, they began to recognize each other's tell. Xander would always underbid his hand in an effort to get Spike to over bid, and Spike's
nose would twitch once to the right when he had a really good hand.

At first, there was no conversation. The only sound in the room was the smack of the cards and the muffled grunt of defeat or the hrmph of success. Then came the first "Ha!" which was followed by "Nope!" and then an "Alright" and a "Yes! Take that to the bank." And gradually the short choppy words and phrases morphed into sentences that required and received responses.

By unspoken mutual agreement, they avoided any subject that would touch a sore spot. Instead they commented on the lack of rain, the status of various sports teams and the current state of television. Spike mentioned several new movies that were playing downtown at the Bexley and Xander asked about the music being played at the Chatterbox.

Around the start of the third hour, Spike noticed Xander squinting, frowning and rubbing his fingertips roughly across his forehead.
"Headache?"

Xander laid down his hand face up, despite the advantage it gave his opponent. He arched his back to work out the kinks and he nodded as he squeezed his eye tightly shut.

"Yeah. Eye strain. The doctors said I would eventually adjust to the lack of depth perception and the headaches would stop, but for now...."

Spike's heart rate escalated in hopeful excitement. It was the first thing Xander had said to him about his disabilities. It was a giant leap of intimacy. Immediately, Spike leaned over and brushed his hand across Xander's crinkled brow. The instant his cool skin touched Xander's, Xander's eye snapped open and he jerked backward out of reach.

"Hey, what the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Spike's first instinct was to snap back but, luckily, he checked himself in time. He simply rolled his eyes at Xander's paranoia and he rose from his chair. Then,
giving his suspicious companion a wide berth of personal space, he walked around to stand behind him. And he gave fair warning. "If you will let me, I think I can help with the headache."

Before Xander could think of a reason to protest, Spike placed his fingertips firmly against Xander's temples and he began to press in and massage in slow, small circles. Xander immediately wanted to respond by jerking away from the wonderfully bony fingers but his body wouldn't let him. The fact was, it felt magnificent!

Spike was thrilled that he hadn't been rejected and he continued to rub as he spoke in an unemotional, clinical manner. "In one of my classes at the university, we have been discussing Eastern beliefs in regard to healing. I found their ideas of acupuncture and acupressure fascinating so I have done some reading on the subject."

As he spoke, his hands turned slightly and he ran his fingers around through the growing, thick, dark
hair. He cupped Xander's skull and he squeezed. Immediately, Xander gripped the edge of the study desk and he groaned as the incredibly wonderful pain sizzled and readjusted itself inside his head. Spike smiled at the response.

All the time, he continued to talk, keeping his tone low, slow and nearly hypnotic. He mentioned the different techniques the Chinese used and the various points on the human body that corresponded to specific healings. As he talked, his hands slid down until his thumbs reached the base of the skull and he pressed firmly.

Xander's eye opened wide and his body jumped as he felt an internal 'pop' that seemed to send a rush of relaxation down his spine and a tingle through his arms and legs. It swam like a warm snake through his veins and settled in his toes. He wanted to protest and ask what the fuck Spike was doing to him, but unfortunately the euphoria caused by whatever the hell the blond did prevented him from protesting. Damn Chinese!
Next Spike's hands moved to Xander's shoulders as his patient's head lolled forward till his chin landed on his chest and the grip on the desk went slack. His verbal abilities deteriorated to a series of grunts, moans and the random four-letter word.

When Spike's skillful hands gripped Xander's shoulders, the masseuse frowned. It was no wonder Xander was so irritable. His muscles felt like steel bands. He was tighter than a nun's snatch at Christmas time. He would have liked to tug off the tee shirt that acted as a barrier and prevented good skin-to-skin contact, but Spike didn't want to risk it. Instead, he did his best to work around the fabric as he methodically pressed his thumbs into the various spots of constriction until he felt the muscles jelly up and the knots melt away under his touch. He would then go on to the next.

This pattern continued for nearly an hour and as Xander's muscles relaxed, Spike's were starting to scream. His arms and shoulders ached and burned from the nonstop strain he was putting on them as he continued to manipulate his soldier's body into a
puddle of goo. He had done down each arm and come back up the spine to the base of the skull when he noticed the sounds that Xander were making had switched to soft snuffles and snores. He was falling asleep.

Spike stopped. He placed his hands on Xander's shoulders and he leaned his lips down toward his patient's right ear.

"Xan?"

"Hmm?"

"Xan. Why don't you lay down and take a nap? I have some things to do and I'll be right back."

"Wha? Huh? Oh, yeah. Sure."

Xander all but tumbled out of the chair and into his nest. Before his head hit his pillow, he was sound asleep. Peacefully. Quietly asleep. Spike stood over him and smiled. He looked like an angel. A very troubled angel. With a sigh, Spike reached his arms
high over his head and stretched the cramps out of his own back. He then collected his books and papers and hurried out of the room. He wanted to be back when Xander awoke.

"Hey, buddy. How you doin'?"

Xander twisted around in his bed. He was sleepy. So damn sleepy, and the voice behind him was both an irritant and an interruption to that slumber. Defiantly, he clamped a hand over his good ear.

"Come on, Xan, you just going to ignore me?"

As Xander's realization sharpened he frowned. Slowly, he rolled over to face what he knew he couldn't be seeing. But was. He blinked. Yep, there it was.

"Ri?"
Riley sat down crosslegged in front of his friend and he grinned. "Yeah, it's me. I've missed you. How you been? No offense, Xan, but you don't look so good."

Xander scowled as the perceived insult overrode his confusion. "That right? Well, fuck you too. By the way, old buddy, aren't you supposed to be dead?"

Riley's shoulders lifted in a slight shrug that said the subject was of little importance. "Nobody's perfect. Course if you aren't glad to see me, I can just...."

Riley started to stand and immediately Xander sat upright and reached out his hand. His voice trembled with the desperate need to keep his friend from leaving. "NO. Wait. I'm sorry. Don't go."

With his smile back in place, Riley plopped back down as Xander scooched around to sit up and face him. He was exactly the same. Same grin. Same sparkle of mischief in his eyes. He even wore the old, faded tee shirt that had been his favorite all through their last year of high school. It was just Riley.
Despite the absurdity of the situation, to Xander it seemed very comfortable. Still, like a pink elephant dancing in the center of the room, some things simply had to be addressed. "So how is it? Being dead."

Riley chucked. "It's all right. As soon as I got to the pearly gates, they offered me the choice between having a huge dick or angel's wings."

Xander craned his neck to peer around Riley's shoulder. Clearly there were no wings and both men hooted at the outrageous joke that probably bordered on blasphemy. When he could catch his breath, Xander went on to the next issue, "So, if everything is just peachy on the other side, how come you're here with me?"

Riley uncrossed his legs and bent his knees. He placed his feet flat on the floor and wrapped his arms around his legs as he appeared to give the question deep thought. "Well, I'm glad you asked that, Xan. See here's the thing. Life and death are
peculiar. They're two sides of the same coin and both should be enjoyed to the fullest. Now, I'm doing my part over there what with the no-wing thing and all but you aren't holding up your end over here. Trust me, buddy, you got a long time to go and you can't spend it all in this room. You'll start to grow cobwebs on your ass. It's time to get out and start to live again."

Xander's hand immediately went up and brushed over the patch on his eye as he looked away in shame. "I can't. I'm ugly and I'm fucked up. Besides, I don't deserve to live. Not after what I did to you. If it wasn't for me, you would still be alive."

Riley's smile melted sadly away as the sorrow surrounding his best friend grew thick and palpable. He shook his head and he tried to explain. "Look at me, Xander. That isn't true. Let me tell you one of the mysteries of the universe that I learned recently. The instant a child is born, the moment he takes his first breath, a number is stamped on him. It's the predetermined number of
days he is destined to live. Nothing can alter that. It can't be shortened and it can't extend. The only control a person has is how they chose to live those days. And the best we can ask for is to have a loved one with us when our day comes due. You were there with me when the sand ran out of my hourglass and that means more than you will ever know. I love you Xander, but you are pissing me off, buddy. You got to get out into the world again."

Xander looked into Riley's eyes imploringly, hoping to understand and be understood. "I don't think I can. I'm so alone. Stay with me Riley, please."

Suddenly, Riley turned and looked back over his shoulder towards the closed bedroom door. When he turned back, his smile and easy manner had returned. "I gotta go, Xan. Sorry. But I'll be back. And, hey, you aren't alone. Shit, buddy, you ain't never been alone."

"No, Riley, wait. Don't go! Don't...."

But Riley was already reaching across and when his
hand brushed over Xander's face, the room went dark.

"Xan? Hey, Xander. Wake up."

Xander jolted awake and he scrambled into his corner in confusion. His head snapped around in all directions and his hands flung out wildly as if he were reaching for an elusive shadow. Then, as the blanket of understanding tumbled over him, his arms fell to his sides and his body slumped.

He had been asleep and Spike woke him up. He was still in his room. Safe. Away from the war. He was dreaming Riley was here too, but that couldn't be. Riley was gone. Forever gone.

Funny thing though, even if it was only a dream, Xander actually felt a little better.
Part Fourteen

With Xander relaxed and asleep, Spike took some time for himself. After calling his father to come and pick up his completed school assignments, he decided to wait for him in the peaceful quiet of the warm afternoon. He spoke briefly to Jessica, kissed her on the cheek and then went out to relax on the porch swing.

White wooden slats were supported by a rusty chain that Tony Harris had been promising to oil for the last four years. As Spike slowly sung back and forth, the constant 'squeak, squeak, squeak' attested to the fact that he had not yet scratched that task off his to-do list.

Spike was glad he hadn't. That was the same sound he heard when he and Xander had sat here as just friends after Spike first moved to town. It was the creaking he heard when they were in the throes of early passion and struggled to keep their hands to
themselves. It was the familiar sound that comforted Spike all those months when Xander was gone and it was what he looked forward to hearing when Xander came home and they could sit here together in the cool, dark nights as they planned their future.

Spike sighed and closed his eyes. His feet unconsciously pushed him back and forth as he contemplated the harsh realities. Life never seems to go as you hoped it would.

"Son?"

Spike opened his eyes and smiled up into the concerned face of his father.

"Hi, Da. I didn't hear you drive up. I guess my mind was wandering."

Rupert Giles sat down beside his son on the swing. He closely examined the lines and creases on his boy's forehead and he sighed.
"How's it going?"

Spike shrugged. "Don't know, do I? Sometimes he seems better and then in the snap of a finger he is mad and far away again. I know he blames himself for Riley's death and he was under the impression that Riley's family hated him. I told him that wasn't true but whether he believes me or not, I can't tell. Fact is, I can't tell what he is thinking at all. I don't think he is crazy but his reality is not necessarily our reality."

Giles nodded thoughtfully. Living in London during the blitz, he had seen the lasting damage that being shell shocked could cause. Most of the time it was an irreparable condition. But sometimes not. In all cases, it was overwhelming and even the medical professionals didn't truly understand it.

Rupert patted his son's knee. He wanted to take his boy home. Away from this residual of the war and convince him that this was a lost cause but he knew William too well. His Will had become a strong man and for that, Rupert was proud. William would not
give up Xander without a fight.

"I understand. It is a most challenging situation. I do have one other concern, William. I brought the whiskey you asked for but I really think adding alcohol to his already fragile mental state is not advisable."

Spike took the bottle of cheap rot-gut from his father's hands and he nodded his acknowledgement. "I know, but frankly that is the least of my concerns. Once I get him back to the here and now, we can talk and then maybe...."

Rupert threw his arm over the back of the swing and his son's shoulders. There was really nothing more to say. Together, in a comfortable silence, the two men swung back and forth and listened as the creaking chain mimicked the crickets in the damp grass.

For the next hour, the silence that engulfed the Harris house gave it the false image that all was right within the four walls. It was the brief time of
cease fire when the jungle again filled the air with the sounds of birds and insects and native monkeys that screeched from the treetops. It was the short reprieve before the bombs again whistled shrilly as they fell from the planes and the gunfire ripped through the foliage, causing it to explode in shards of green leaves and branches that sprayed into the air.

It was, for Spike, an hour that soothed his soul and gave him time to regroup and reenergize. But it was an hour that he was away from Xander and he had told him that he would be there when he awoke. It was time to go. With a smile, he pulled several papers from the book on his lap and he handed them to his father. "Here are my assignments. I appreciate you taking them in for me. I don't have any due tomorrow but if you will stop by on Friday, I will have more then. A week from Thursday I take my final exam and I want to make sure that I'm caught up on everything before that."

Rupert recognized the dismissal and he accepted the papers graciously. The professor in him was
tempted to score them but the father side had him fold them neatly and tuck them in the pocket of his suit jacket. He then rose from the swing and faced his boy. "I will, of course. If you need anything, please call. Jenny and I are most concerned. About both of you. We are very proud of you, William."

Spike stood up and embraced his father warmly. It was the only response he had and apparently the only one Rupert needed. Spike watched as his father walked away.

When he returned to the house, he heard Jessica fussing about in the kitchen and he decided to go in for a short chat.

"Mmmm. Smells good. What are you fixing?"

Jessica smiled. In all the long months Xander had been gone, Spike had shown up regularly, sat in that same chair and asked the identical question. It was a much-needed touch of normalcy that brought her comfort. "Chicken and dumplings for dinner. Easy to
chew and digest, and the carrots and garden peas should be chock-full of vitamins for him."

"Besides that, you know it's my favorite."

Jessica laughed. The first time she had done that in days and it was wonderful. "You say that about everything I cook. You're shameless, Spike, just shameless."

Spike jumped up and reached around her, snatching a carrot off the counter. He kissed her lightly on the cheek and then bit the end off the carrot in a move that screamed Bugs Bunny. "I am indeed, Mum, and now I better take my shameless tushy up the stairs and check on our sleeping beauty. I told him I would be back before he woke up."

Jessica nodded. She didn't need to keep thanking Spike. He knew how she felt. She only wondered how long it would be before frustration and a broken heart drove him away.

Bolting up the stairs, Spike gently opened the
bedroom door so as not to startle his friend. When he stuck his head in, he could see Xander still prone on his blankets on the floor and he was relieved that he had made it back in time. Quietly, he slipped in. When he tiptoed over, he heard the small whimpering sound and saw Xander's arms and legs twitching like a hound dog dreaming of chasing a rabbit.

Concerned that his ex-soldier was trapped in the nightmares of the war, Spike knelt down beside him and placed a hand on Xander's jerking shoulder.

"Xan. Xander. Wake up. Xan, it's me, Spike. Wake up."

With a sudden full-body jolt, Xander's eye popped open and he scampered into his corner as he looked all around. Spike leaned back, out of the range of Xander's flying hands until the realization of the reality cleared his vision and he was fully aware and awake.

"Where is he? Where...."
"Who, Xan? No one's here. You were dreaming. There's no one but you and me."

Xander blinked and took a minute to slow his heartrate and control his breathing. It had seemed so real. So fucking real.
"Oh, yeah, sure. Sorry. Sorry. I guess... I thought...dreaming, yeah, I was dreaming."

Spike sat back on his heels and puffed out a short chuckle of relief. The physical contact of the earlier massage made Spike long to reach out and take Xander's hand or wrap an arm around his shoulder in comfort but he knew better than to try. "Okay then. Well, it's early afternoon, why don't I have Mom bring us up some sandwiches and we can...."

"No. No, I think I would rather go downstairs and eat."

Spike blinked his surprise. He sorely wanted to inquire as to the sudden change of heart but feared that examining the horse's mouth too closely would
cause the gift to disappear. Neither of them mentioned the fiasco of breakfast but Spike was sure that if this was Xander's choice, he would be more congenial. At least Spike hoped so.

"Great. Great. Hey, I've got an idea. After lunch, while Mom is in the kitchen cleaning up, why don't you and I watch a little telly? We can turn on General Hospital just like old times and I can get you caught up on what's happening."

Xander frowned and his hand brushed over the eye patch, a move that made Spike want to stomp his foot and chastise the wearer. Instead, he ground his teeth together and waited as Xander seemed to think over this proposal, as though it carried the weight and magnitude of a major military maneuver. After a few moments, and much to Spike's surprise, Xander agreed.
Part Fifteen

"How do I look?"

Xander stood, like a small child who had dressed himself for the first time. His hair, which had grown out much too long, was parted and plastered down. His shirt was an old button-down that Spike remembered from the days when they laughed and cursed while wrestling the row of plastic buttons as they hurried to try and get naked.

The jeans were the ones from breakfast that hung on his hips and he kept tugging them up. Spike considered speaking to Mom about buying a new pair. One, two sizes smaller.

While Xander dressed, Spike had made the determination that the only way to get him more accepting of Spike's touch, was to touch him. As much and as often as possible. Therefore, while going down to lunch was a seemingly nonevent,
Spike adopted an expression of serious contemplation as he studied Xander's appearance. "Not bad. Not bad at all. Oh, wait, you have a bit of hair that wants standing up."

Spike moved over and ran his hand several times over Xander's perfectly flat hair petting him like a puppy. He then made approving grunts and 'Hmm's as he straightened Xander's collar and ran his hand firmly down the front of the shirt. When Spike reached up under the shirtdetail and grabbed two belt loops to give the jeans a tug upward, Xander 'Eeped' and stepped back.

Spike simply played off the near-grope and went on to distract him with other thoughts. "Great. You look great. So I'm thinking lunch, an hour or two of telly, back up here while I do some paperwork, you take a bath and we go down for a late dinner. How's all that with you?"

Xander gave a huff of indignation. He put his fists on his hips and took a step back. The look of insult on his face was so unguarded that it made Spike smile.
The fact was, the war Xander was now fighting was an internal one. A big part of him wanted to continue to hide away until he would just wither and die.

Another part of him was not so sure. The talk with Riley had caused a major fault line to shift and rumble within him. Realistically, he knew Riley was a dream. Emotionally, he was not so sure. It had seemed too vivid. Too real. His friend's touch on his face had been as tangible as Spike's was just now.

And Riley forgave him. More than that, he had told him there was nothing to forgive. It was a bizarre concept Xander would never have considered on his own. Going a step further, Riley charged Xander with the responsibility to live a life for both of them. Riley always did have impossible dreams. But the most important part of their conversation was that Riley said he would be back, so hanging his hopes on that, Xander promised himself grudgingly that he would try. He just didn't want Spike to get too comfortable with his position as C.O.
"Well, well, well. It seems you have everything all planned out. What time have you scheduled my daily shit? Did it ever occur to you that I would prefer to make my own arrangements? Maybe there's something else I would rather do."

"Is there?"

"No but...."

"All right then. Off we go."

The rest of the day started off without a hitch. Lunch was a repeat of breakfast with Jessica and Spike chatting aimlessly about one pointless gossipy thing after another as Xander silently ate his ham sandwich. He was surprised by the fact that he was able to devour an entire half sandwich along with a partial bowl of tomato soup before his stomach stretched to capacity and warned him to stop. This time, however, he checked his temper at the door and spoke only briefly, thanking her for her efforts.
Afterwards, they retired to the living room. Before his deployment, Xander had been a major fan of all things television. He could sing the entire theme songs of Mr. Ed and Secret Agent. He knew which days of the week Ed Sullivan, Perry Mason and Hullabaloo were on and he adjusted his life to fit around them. Now, it just seemed like stupid dancing pictures on a small screen.

When they entered the room, Xander had made a major tactical error. He had walked in first and chosen to sit on the worn, comfortable floral sofa. Immediately, Spike plopped down next to him with a smug, winner's smile on his face. Xander mentally kicked himself. He should have refused to sit until after Spike, and then selected a position furthest away. Chalk up a victory for the blond.

Spike was delighted. He grinned as he dropped down to sit next to Xander, assuming that his companion had picked the couch to sit on so that they could be closer together. Spike's heart skittered in hope that maybe things were improving.
One PM. General Hospital.

Spike did his best to rattle on about which doctor was having an affair with which patient but it vastly exceeded Xander's attention span. Instead, Xander blocked out the monotonous, non-stop monolog of medical madcap adventures and he took the time to look around.

Nothing had changed. The same pictures hung on the walls and the furniture was arranged in the exact position it was the day he heaved his duffle bag over his shoulder and marched off into hell. It felt staged. False. As if he were in a television program of his own. "Xander Harris Comes Home." He wondered what his theme song would be. Possibly an altered rendition of "I Left My Heart In San Francisco." It could be, "I Left My Eye, Along With My Sanity, In Viet Nam."

Maybe, he thought, it looks odd because I can only see it with half the vision I used to.
Maybe, he pondered, it's because after seeing how other people live, I'm seeing it twice as well. Either way, despite its familiarity, it didn't feel like home anymore.

"...oh, and this is the intern that swiped the pain pills from the old patient who....."

Xander glanced over at Spike and looked at his soft lips as they formed meaningless words. Somewhere in the back of Xander's mind, he remembered sitting in the Bexley theatre and watching Spike the same way in the shifting shadows and light of the picture show. It was the first time they held hands.

Xander glanced down at Spike's hands as they flipped and flopped like fish while Spike rambled on. He wondered if Spike would pull back in repulsion if Xander tried to clasp his hand in his. Xander sighed. It didn't matter. Once Spike found out the lies, he would leave. If Xander's grotesque face and body weren't enough to chase the blond away, Xander's ugly truths would be.
"...the telly at our place."

"What?" Something about Spike's last statement snapped Xander from his mental musings and brought him back to the here and now.

"I said, your mum has a much bigger telly than we do, but we get all three of the channels with the rabbit ears and, really, how many channels do you need? You can only watch one at a time."

Xander leaned back, crossed his arms over his chest and his face scrunched up in a perfect imitation of a bulldog. "What the fuck are you talking about? 'WE' do not have a telly. YOU have a telly and I don't have jack-squat. I am a grown man who is damn near homeless except for the fact that my parents are letting me stay here. If you have somewhere else to go, please, don't let me keep you."

"yorm fterl prk.knmdt."

"What? What did you say?"
Xander tipped his head, turning his good ear. In response, Spike fully faced him and responded in a very clear, concise voice as he carefully enunciated each word. "I said, you are a bloody prick. I picked out that flat for the two of us. I wrote you a dozen letters about it while you were in the hospital. I love that fucking place because it was supposed to be our home. But fuck, I guess you don't need to worry about me forcing you into it because after the first of next month, I can't pay the rent and your arse will be evicted from a flat you have never even been in."

Xander huffed as one more brick of guilt was heaped onto the mountain that was already stacked up on his back. "I told you. I never got any letters. I didn't know about your apartment. I'm sorry if your coming here inconveniences you and causes you to lose your precious home."

Spike just shook his head. He was maxed out. He clamped his jaw tightly to prevent the long spew of acid that wanted to spill out and he jumped to his feet. His face was flushed beet red and his fists
were tightly clenched. He loomed over Xander for a moment as his chest heaved. Then without saying another word, Spike turned and marched up the stairs leaving Xander alone.

Xander blinked in confusion as he muttered, "Damn, what crawled up his butt?"

Then he realized that he was outside his comfort zone. Alone. Xander hoisted himself off the couch and he hurried upstairs. Quickly he slipped into his room. He wore his best misunderstood, pitiful expression and expected Spike to apologize for the abandonment and uncalled-for outburst.

He didn't get it.

Spike sat at the student table. He had the small lamp on and he was focused on his schoolwork. Xander cleared his throat. Nothing. Xander coughed. No response.

"Are you doing your homework?"
Spike continued to ignore him. Instead, he flipped over a page of his book and he scribbled down some notes in his spiral notebook as if he were totally absorbed in the fascinating facts of the debit column of his accounting class.

Xander pouted. He didn't like being ignored. What the hell was the point of Spike coming here to take care of him if he was just going to neglect him? Xander continued to stand and stare at the man sitting just a few feet away, and he wondered if maybe Spike was as off his rocker as Xander was. One minute he was giving wonderful massages and the next he was acting as if he didn't even know Xander existed.

"I'm going to go take my bath. I don't need any help so don't come in."

Other than a snort of annoyance, Spike gave no indication that he heard the childish announcement and he only turned his face when he was sure the bratty ex-soldier had left the room. With a sigh, Spike realized that Xander had not taken any clean
underwear with him and he pushed back out of his chair.

Squatting down, he riffled through Xander's duffle bag, before remembering that he had earlier extracted the last of the supply. Luckily, Jessica had delivered a bundle of laundry still warm from the dryer. Just as he was about to stand, something in the camo-green canvas bag caught his eye.

It was a bundle tucked far in the bottom. A thick, neat stack of letters tied with a piece of twine. When Spike pulled them out he recognized his own handwriting. Flipping through the top right corner, he saw that the dates spanned the weeks just before and during the time of Xander's hospitalization.

They were crinkled, smudged and obviously well-read.

And there was one other thing.
One of them, dated before the accident, was splattered with blood.

**Part Sixteen**

Spike quickly tucked the letters back in their hiding spot and he put the duffle bag back where it was, at the foot of the bed and next to the bottle and a quarter of cheap whiskey. The condition of the envelopes had graphically reminded Spike that Xander was in much the same state. Battered, bloodied and still clutching the hopes and dreams of a normal life.

It renewed Spike's determination in his mission.

He realized he was allowing himself to become too emotional, although this was certainly a very emotional situation. He needed to stop taking each dig and verbal crack as a personal assault and recognize it for what it was. A barrier. A protective wall that Xander was trying to build between them as a buffer against being hurt.

Xander still obviously believed that his injuries were
too repulsive and would drive Spike to greener pastures and sexier men. Spike would prove his loyalty and love. He had been faithful ever since he and Xander had met, and the flaws on the outside did nothing to change the beauty of the man Xander was on the inside.

Spike yawned. All this thinking was making him tired. It was exhausting to be this overwhelmed and frustrated. Kicking off his shoes, he climbed on the bed and he curled up. He balled the pillow under his head and he closed his eyes. The thought of putting all this aside for a while and slipping away into the unconscious world of sweet dreams and soft, snuffly snores seemed like a small piece of heaven.

So he relaxed. He had the assurance that Xander's bath would last at least as long as the forty winks Spike needed to recharge and rejuvenate himself. Unfortunately, his estimation of the duration of the bath was a slightly miscalculated as, thirty-eight winks later, the bedroom door slammed open and Spike was jolted awake.
"AH! What the fuck? Christ, Xander. Give a guy a little warning."

Xander stood in the doorway angry and unrepentant. He was damp and glistening and wore nothing but a towel wrapped tightly around his waist. His hair was clean and combed and, of course, his patch was securely planted over his missing eye.

Once he was wide awake from his aborted nap, Spike took the opportunity to really look Xander over. His months in the war in the jungle had taken a terrible toll on him. His ribs and breastbone protruded, and his once sculpted stomach and chest were sunken and caved in. The towel that he gripped virginally over his privates formed around his sharp hipbones, and his butt hung flat and soft behind him.

Still, despite all the physical changes in this body that he used to know so well, there were still certain markers that pegged this as all Xander Harris. The stance, the familiar spread of dark chest
hair that led teasingly south toward...Spike wondered. Xander said everything down there was still intact and fully functional, yet he kept it covered as though the very sight of it might send Spike screaming off into the night.

Spike had read stories. Accounts of men in the war who had met with horrendous personal tragedies. Some had been captured and had their dicks cut off. Some had their privates accidentally or intentionally shot during a close-range fire fight.

One man wrote of a particular sort of bomb that the Cong used that was referred to as a 'bouncing betty.' It was called that because when you stepped on it, it would spring up and explode about waist high. Death was the result of blood loss unless you were caught in time and saved. Sometimes saved was worse because it left you crippled, maybe paralyzed and most certainly castrated. This poor joker reported that although the rest of him was relatively recovered, his balls had been blown the fuck off. Clean off. No more nuts. Period.
"Well if you are through staring at my junk, I would appreciate you giving me some clean underwear. Jerk."

Spike jumped. He blushed hotly as he realized he had been blatantly focused on whatever was hidden behind towel number one. He mumbled an apology as he scooted off the bed and over to the dresser where Jessica had earlier placed all his clean laundry. He snatched out fresh boxers and a white tee and he hurried to hand them over.

Then he waited.

Xander scowled. "Turn around."

"What?"

"I said, turn around. I am not dropping this towel and dressing until you turn the fuck around."

"It's a goddamn pecker, Xander. I've seen plenty of them before."
"Yeah, I'll just bet you have."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"Nothing. Nothing. Just turn the fuck around."

"Oh, for pete's sake, Xander. Quit acting like a fucking prima donna. I won't.... FINE!"

Spike spun around and with a huff of pure exasperation he folded his arms over his chest and he waited. Then his eyebrows shot straight up as he realized he was facing the mirror that hung over the student desk. With a very slight, subtle shift to his other foot, he was able to lean just enough to the right to give him a clear reflection of the man who stood behind him.

He watched with bated breath and tense anticipation as Xander paused. He saw him toss the tee over his shoulder with one hand as his other continued to grip the rectangle of concealing cotton. Then, when Xander was certain that Spike was not going to spin around and catch him, Xander
dropped the towel and he scrambled into the underwear.

Spike all but squealed with delight. When Xander squatted down and lifted first one foot then the other into the shorts, Spike got a good look at all Xander's equipment. The lovely, glorious penis had swung gently from side to side. It was unmarred, unmarked and wonderfully undamaged. And the best part? Not only was the frank healthy and happy, but the beans that went with it had not been served up as a meal for the jungle predators.

It wasn't that Spike was considering the hope of a resumption of a physical relationship with his man, although God knows he was. No, Spike knew that right or wrong, a man's self-worth is planted squarely between his legs. If your thermometer won't rise in direct proportion to the heat of the moment, your self-esteem will plunge to the lowest degree.

Xander Harris may be missing an eye and an eardrum but his cock and balls were fully intact.
Apparently, all the thermometer needed was the right incentive to get the mercury bubbling.

"Okay, you can turn back around."

Spike checked the huge grin on his face and replaced it with the grouchy pout that he knew Xander would expect, and he offered up the cursory complaints. "Shit. You act like I don't have any self-control. Like if I saw your magnificent peter, I would throw myself on it and do unspeakable things with you. Maybe I'm not in the mood. Did you ever consider that? My life does not revolve around sex, Xander, and whether or not your johnson is still attached is of no concern to me."

Xander frowned at the confusing turn the conversation had taken. Sometimes Xander wasn't sure which of them was supposed to be crazy. While he mulled over the question, his fingertips brushed across the patch. On one hand he knew he was too ugly to attract anyone with two good eyes, but on the other hand he didn't remember them even discussing the issue of sex.
While Xander continued to ponder this bizarre anomaly, Spike began flitting around the room collecting a set of his own clothes and acting as though some major bone of contention between them had suddenly been resolved.

"Well, I do believe I will take a bath also and get ready for dinner. Unlike you, I am not prone to a dramatic case of the vapors if my naked body is on display so if you would like to come in and sit and visit with me while I wash, I wouldn't scream and throw you out."

"Fuck you."

"Ah, yes. You are a man of deep thought and eloquent communication, my friend."

Xander caught himself just as he was about to prove Spike's point with a response of another, 'fuck you.' Instead, he simply grunted and stomped over to his corner, where his back hit the wall and he slid down to sit in his nest. Then as a non-verbal fuck you,
Xander picked up his whiskey, he pulled the cork out and took a big swallow.

Spike just shook his head and he walked away.

Dinner that evening was tense, to say the least. Sitting at the head of the table, Tony did his best to engage his son in a conversation that skipped through a variety of subjects while skirting around others that could be as explosive as the one Xander's jeep rolled on.

Mindful of Spike's order to be respectful, Xander responded to each question or comment with a terse, 'Yes Sir' or 'No Sir.' All the time, Xander kept his face down and he refused to make eye contact. He was both embarrassed and deeply ashamed. Tony had always been proud of his son. His good looks, his athletic ability, his promising future. And now Xander was none of those things. He was surely a failure in his father's eyes.

By the time the pie was brought out, Xander was nearly in tears. He felt his self-control slipping and
his claustrophobia starting to churn. Without warning he shoved his chair away from the table and he stood straight up. "I'm sorry. I don't feel well. May I please be excused?"

Jessica set the pie on the table and looked at Spike for an indication of what was wrong and what she should do about it. Spike simply smiled sadly and nodded his head as he stabbed another forkful of cheesy macaroni. Xander stood at a rigid stance of attention while he waited. Finally, Jessica answered in a voice as normal as she was able to manage.

"Why of course, honey."

Upon given the 'at ease,' Xander spun around and darted upstairs. Both parents turned to Spike who just shrugged. He was in no hurry to follow. Instead, he responded cheerfully. "Well, I see you made a cherry pie. You know that's my favorite. How about cutting me an extra large slice?"

Spike held his plate out and Jessica did what she did best. She smiled and cut the pie.
Part Seventeen

It was late in the evening and the living room was silent except for the canned laughter and the tinkle, tinkle sound Samantha made as she wiggled her nose and created another catastrophe in the life of her poor husband, Darrin.

The room was bathed in an odd grey-blue light that danced and flashed in shifting hues and shades from the television screen that no one was paying particular attention to. Jessica's nervous hands found some relief with her crocheting but the eye strain quickly had her lying it in her lap with a sigh. Tony longed to turn on the news channel but feared the awkwardness of a discussion that it may induce. Spike simply lounged in his favorite spot on the sofa.
Finally, in the last scene, Darrin put his foot down and demanded that Endora change the neighbor back from a toad to a human. When he banished her from the house, the unseen audience exploded in wild laughter and applause and Spike knew that that was his sign that it was time for bed.

He wished Endora could fling her arms in the air and alter his reality to make everything as it had been just two short years ago. Life had been so easy then. So simple, hopeful and happy. Spike missed happy. Just as Bucky the Ipana beaver danced onto the screen and touted the attributes of his toothpaste, Spike rose to his feet. He stretched his arms high over his head and he scratched his chest. "Well I don't know about you, but I'm beat. I think I'll go on to bed."

He circled around the coffee table and kissed Jessica on the cheek, after which he passed by Tony and casually patted him on the shoulder. Then, with legs that felt as if they were encased in cement, he climbed the stairs.
As soon as he opened the bedroom door, he could smell it. The sour stench of cheap whiskey. The small goose-neck lamp on the study desk was the only light on, but it gave off enough illumination to allow Spike to see the room and its other occupant clearly.

Xander was slumped in his corner and he had all but drained the remainder of the first bottle. Actually, Spike thought, it could be worse. He might have been working on the second one. Feeling Xander's intense focus, Spike kicked off his shoes and he took his time as he undressed. When he was down to his shorts, he slipped into bed and he rolled over to face the nest.

"Why do you drink so much, Xander?"

To be honest, it was almost a rhetorical question that Spike never expected to have answered. At best, he thought a response of 'fuck you' or a derisive snort would be the most he would get. Much to his amazement, perhaps comforted by the cover of darkness, Xander began to speak.
"When we first got to Nam, we were stationed far from the actual fighting. We were in an area surrounded by several small villages and a lot of the old men and women came onto the base to do menial tasks like laundry, cleaning, and tending the ox we kept since no one, not even the know-it-all officers, had a clue about caring for them. At the time, we were naive enough to think that because they were locals and not the Cong, they were on our side. Pfttt. Fuckin' gooks."

Xander took another swallow while Spike lay motionless and waited for the story to continue. After a foul-smelling belch, it did.

"So anyway, in the evenings the workers would leave the base and go back to their homes. Their huts. There, they all played these flutes made of bamboo reeds. At night when the lights were out, we would lay in our bunks and listen to the far-off sounds of these bamboo flutes. At first, it was nice. It was a hollow, haunting sound that would lull us to sleep. Later on when we moved up towards the hot
zone, it changed. We would spend days at a time crouched in the tall, wet grass of the jungle and all around us we would hear that fucking sound. Those fucking bamboo flutes. It was impossible to tell which direction it was coming from or even how near it was. It was a mental torture that never stopped. It seemed like even the sounds of the bombs and gunfire couldn't block it out. It drove us crazy. When our jeep hit the...when I had the accident and blew out my eardrum, the sound settled in my head. I can't hear a fucking sound from the outside, but that constant, hollow sound like a bamboo flute rings in my dead ear non-stop. The fucking quacks at the VA hospital said it would eventually go away but it doesn't. It never goes away. Only the whiskey makes it tolerable."

Spike was stunned. He thought he knew it all. He believed that his love would be all it took to snap Xander out of this funk and return things to a semblance of normal. The reality was that Xander's experiences in Viet Nam were so far out of Spike's depth and understanding that he had no starting
point for comprehending and dealing, let alone helping.

Spike pulled the sheet up under his chin and he sighed. "Oh. Okay."

"Yeah."

Xander drank the last swallow and tossed the empty bottle toward the trash can, over-shooting it by several inches. It was a depressing miss that reminded him again of his ocular disabilities. As his hand brushed over his eye-patch, Xander slid down and he curled up. With a sigh, Spike closed his eyes and prayed for sleep.

A sleep that refused to come.

His body was exhausted. His eyes burned and his back ached but his brain simply would not stop churning. All Spike could think of was his lover crouched in the misery of the jungle, wet and scared, while Spike patted himself on the back for baking cookies and mailing boxes of stupidity to a
country halfway around the world.

Spike squinted his eyes open and glanced at the round clock that ticked loudly by the bed. One hour. He had been lying here an hour. He then stared into the dark corner where Xander lay unmoving and apparently sound asleep. With a sigh, Spike prepared to roll over and try on his other side, but before he could move he saw the figure in the corner stir.

It was an action that would not have seemed out of the ordinary considering people move and roll over in their sleep all the time. He himself was about to do just that. But this was different. This wasn't the fish-flopping of a man in slumber seeking a more comfortable position. This was the calculated, stealthy move of a predator crouched and focused on a prey.

It was slight and subtle. It was smooth and slow.

Spike held still. Like a possum, he feigned sleep, all the time watching through barely slitted eyes. He
maintained a steady pattern of breathing even as his heart rate escalated. His hands under the covers balled into fists as his brain questioned if his body was in danger.

Was Xander a threat? Did he think he was back in the war and Spike was the enemy? Fear was beginning to seep through Spike's bones like a cold chill as he waited to see what Xander would do. Part of him wanted to jump up and yell "Hey!" to assure that Xander was wide awake, but a little voice inside him told him to weigh caution over impulse.

So he did. He waited. And goosebumps rose on the surface of his skin.

Slowly, moving with the fluidity of a cat, Xander never took his eye off Spike as he moved around in his nest to crouch on his hands and knees. He tipped his head just a fraction of an inch to the side so that his good ear could pick up any room noise or deviation in Spike's breathing.
Then he began to crawl.

Spike swallowed hard around the lump in his throat. He was afraid to blink. He now knew what a mouse felt like as the alleycat slipped in for the kill.

Closer and closer, Xander crept toward the bed. His knees and hands made no sound against the hardwood floor as he slinked nearer.

The muscles in Spike's jaw clenched tightly together in terror, which was the only thing now that kept him from screaming out his fear.

As Xander reached the side of the bed, he suddenly dropped down out of sight. Spike's eyes bugged open and darted in all directions for a hint of where the soldier had gone.

Then, verrrry slowly, the top of Xander's head began to rise. He was now just inches from where Spike lay.

First was the top of the head and the wild,
uncombed crop of dark hair. Then the smooth, white forehead that glowed in the reflected moonlight. When Spike saw the first tip of the black, ominous eye-patch, he squeezed his eyes tightly shut and prayed to whatever saints protected foolish boyfriends in danger.

Xander held his breath. He stealthily rose up until he could clearly see Spike's face in the limited light of the small room. He listened for the pattern of breathing and he checked for the posture of the blond's body to assure himself that he was sound asleep.

He wouldn't do this unless Spike was sound asleep.

Spike could feel the fear rising to an uncontrollable level but he knew escape was impossible. Xander would have him before he could get off the bed.

Xander watched. Spike's eyes were closed and his face was slack. He was asleep. He was unaware.

Slowly, Xander eased up and he very gently crawled
onto the bed. In a move so smooth and liquid that he made no imprint on the mattress, he quietly lowered himself until he laid prone next to the man he still loved. With his back to Spike, Xander let out a long, slow sigh and he silently dozed off.

Spike's eyes bugged open and his mouth gaped as he focused on the back of the brown hair that rested on the pillow beside him. Immediately his arm went up to wrap around Xander's waist and pull him back into a full spoon. But he stopped. He knew instinctively it would be a deal-breaker and he laid his arm back down.

Then, with a smile of contentment, Spike also fell asleep.

Part Eighteen
Strict adherence to regimentation. It is the center. The anchor. Every military man quickly learns that even when chaos swirls all around you, having a solid understanding of the rules and sticking to them gives you great comfort when nothing else makes sense.

As the days came and went, Xander found he was gaining his footing and maybe even a small semblance of his sanity by the little things he had grown to count on. Their daily schedule fell into a predictable pattern and he liked that very much.

He awoke early. He didn't need an alarm or even a rooster crowing at sunrise. Months spent in a war zone trains you to awaken to an internal clock you can preset to any time. His preset was thirty minutes before the dawn broke over the horizon. It allowed him a few precious moments to watch Spike sleep before he slipped from the bed and back into his nest.

He could not allow Spike to know he had been there. His love and emotional attachment was a
weakness he refused to show.

When Spike woke up, he would immediately face Xander's corner and smile, bidding him a good morning and announcing that they would have a great day. Xander always thought that an odd premonition considering each day was almost identical to the last, but maybe that was what made it such a safe bet. They had been good days. No conflicts. No pressure.

Xander had learned that Spike was a first-thing-in-the-morning bather. As soon as he got up, he would trot off to the bathroom down the hall to take a long, hot bath. He said it helped him wake up and cleaned the nighttime funk from his body. For some reason, it amazed Xander that he had never known that about Spike.

Breakfast followed. He did his best to join in whatever conversation that Spike and his mother were having, but generally their reference to people he didn't know or activities and clubs he was unaware of only reminded him that, while he was
gone, they had built a life without him.

Xander still would not look directly at either of his parents, knowing their revulsion would be written on their faces. The least he could do for them was to spare them that.

Once or twice, Spike had gone off on some tangent about the need for exercise to strengthen a body that was going to seed. He had spoken of joining the gym down at the local YMCA. He mentioned running in the mornings and even going to the beach to swim. He had even gone so far as to punch his fist in the air enthusiastically as he used terms like 'get your heart pumping' and 'work those muscles before they atrophy.'

Xander responded with a scowl before shoving another slab of pancake in his mouth.

Still in all, it was all right. The food was good and his body no longer rejected it. A point accentuated by the fact that he seemed to be gaining weight.
After breakfast, they returned to their room. Their room. Xander secretly like the sound of that very much. Even though it wouldn't last, for now he could pretend. During the hours until lunch, Spike studied his books and did his schoolwork. Silently, Xander studied Spike. He sat in his corner and he locked that one good eye on the blond. Spike was different, but how?

Just two years ago, Spike was a boy. He used to sit at that same desk and wiggle as he babbled on excitedly about everything and anything. His feet would cross at the ankles and swing just inches from the floor. He was like a ball of atomic energy just waiting to explode.

Now, he was still. Quiet. Focused. He spoke in a slower, more measured tone and gave weight and caution to his words before he issued them. He had grown up while Xander was gone and that gave the soldier grief. It was one more thing Xander had sacrificed for the good of his country.

Spike was not a child. He was a young man. A very
handsome young man. A college man.

Xander would sit there quietly and try to picture Spike on campus, walking through the trees and the green, perfectly manicured grass. He would pass groups of other students who would admire him as he went by, then throw their hands in the air and call to him. "Hi! Hey, Spike, come and join...."

"Do they call you Spike or William over at the college?"

Spike had stopped reading about fiscal spreadsheets and looked over with a blink of confusion.

"All the professors and most of the students call me Will. My friends call me Spike. Why?"

Xander had just shrugged like he really didn't care one way or the other, but in truth, that simple statement colored his daydreams in wild, deep shades of green. He had friends that called him Spike. Close, personal friends. Probably men that
Xander had never met. Men that Spike counted as intimate enough to warrant private nicknames. What did he call them? Sugar? Darlin’? Or maybe Jimmy Dean for the size of their sausage.

Immediately, Xander could feel the start of an anxiety attack creeping up and he checked himself. He reasoned that since Spike would soon be dumping him, it was best that he would have other men that he could go to. Jealousy was pointless. Still, it reared its ugly head whenever his musings wandered in that direction. So he zapped them with a mental cattle prod to keep his thoughts in line.

Another pleasant time of the day was after lunch. He and Spike relaxed on the couch and watched TV. It was a holdover to the old days. Xander discovered that he still loved him some TV. And now, his new obsession was Dark Shadows. During the commercial breaks, he would expound on the evil that was Barnabas Collins. He was aghast at how naive and stupid poor Caroline was, and he had his suspicions and theories about the good doctor.
Spike was less enthusiastic. Vampires and haunted houses had never been his cup of tea, but he tried. It was a subject Xander wanted to discuss and Spike just wanted the normalcy of a conversation with his boyfriend. So he tried. He fought the urge to snicker when Barnabas flashed his poorly made fangs and he held back criticizing the color of Caroline's scarf that encircled her neck and concealed her bite marks. He suspected that Xander believed it all to be real.

The worst part of the day was dinner. Xander's relationship with his father was strained. Neither knew what to say to the other and it hurt them both. Tony tried talking about the war. He seemed oblivious to the flinching and nervous twitch in Xander's jaw. Also poorly received were any and all suggestions as to the various job possibilities around Sunnydale that could accommodate a one-eyed, half-deaf war vet.

The best time of the day was later, when dinner was done and the house fell quiet. Jessica was in the kitchen cleaning up and Tony had retreated to his
lounge chair to listen to Walter and the CBS news team give the war report in all its vivid detail. By then, the sun had set.

As the evening set in, the cool night air called to them. Secure in the knowledge that the yellow halo of light given off by the street light pole down the block was too dim to reveal his facial deformities, Xander would allow himself to be coaxed out and onto the porch. There, he and Spike would sit together on the old slat swing and they would gently sway back and forth.

The crickets would chirp and the lightning bugs flashed off and on as they flew by. The night sounds were distant and seemed cued, each at their own time. A car horn would honk, followed by a motor growing louder as it approached then fading as it moved on. At some point Jim, the older man across the street, would open his door and let his Chihuahua out. The little dog would yap and bark as annoying little dogs do, and then it would lift its leg on a tree before running back to the house. It was all so normal that it seemed surreal.
They didn't talk much. They didn't need to. Spike would sigh and say what a good day it had been. Xander always agreed. Spike then gave an updated weather report that consisted of "Supposed to rain tomorrow" or "Another hot one," at which point Xander would co-sign with a "Yup," and the swing continued to sway.

One thing both men would agree upon was that the silence between them was in no way uncomfortable. It was peaceful and it fed their need to be together. They both knew that sooner or later they would have to venture off the porch. Life didn't stand still forever. Spike had to get back to his schoolwork and Xander... Xander had no idea where to go from here.

When the evening got late, by mutual unspoken agreement the swing would stop and the men would rise. Both would pause. Spike wanted to take Xander by the hand and, despite himself, Xander desperately craved the other's touch. But they didn't. Instead, Spike would lead the way and
Xander would follow. In the house. Up the stairs. Toward their room.

And then came the weirdest part of Xander's day. His bath.

Beginning on the third day of his bunking with Spike, Xander was still resolute about his bathroom time being personal and private. Except that it wasn't. Each day, as soon as his hot water was run, his clothes discarded and his body set to soak, he would glance over to find he had company. A visitor. A chatty bastard. The first time set the tone.

"Riley."

"Xan."

"What do you want?"

"I told you I would be back. I figured I would give you time to pull your head out of your ass but I see that hasn't happened yet."
Xander heaved a great sigh as he turned his head. Logic told him that Riley was not there, yet he was hard to ignore.

"I see Spike is still here."

"Yeah, I told him to fuck off, but he's apparently as deaf as I am cause he doesn't seem to hear me."

Riley shook his head in disgust. "Why you acting like such a prick? All you talked about for the whole time we were gone was Spike, Spike, Spike. So here he is. Why aren't you jumping on him and riding him like a Shetland pony?"

Xander's face screwed up in disgust at the indelicate suggestion. He considered all types of responses, each sprinkled liberally with four-letter expletives, but in the end he just shrugged.

"One night when I was in the hospital, two of the orderlies were cleaning, mopping the floor and dumping bedpans. They thought I was asleep and they were talking about me. One of them laughed
and asked the other how ugly a girl would have to be in order to fuck somebody that looked like me. The other one said I would have to fuck her doggie style cause she would puke if she had to see my face. The first one said that if you turn out all the lights, nobody is ugly in the dark."

Riley seemed to give all that deep thought. He then propped his foot up on the side of the bathtub and Xander seemed fascinated by the fact that his not-here-friend was barefoot. It was a condition Riley considered irrelevant to the topic of Xander getting laid.

"Well, the way I see it, the joke's on them 'cause you don't want to fuck a girl anyhow. Now considering Spike is determined to hang around, and since you already have a hell of a boner, why not just go in there and stick it in him."

"EEWWWW!! In the first place, that is just fucked up and in the second place, my dick hasn't been hard since...oh."
Xander was startled to look down and find that his pecker was very hard indeed. It was fascinating. He poked it and it bounced happily. It was extraordinary. It was magnificent. Riley leaned back against the toilet bowl and chuckled.

"I'm assuming that isn't for me."

Xander grunted his response. He was already frantically lathering up his hands. The tip of his tongue poked out the corner of his mouth as he gripped his tool and with a huge sigh of contentment, he went to work.

Riley grinned and hoisted himself to his feet and he stretched. "Well, I can see that you're busy so I guess I'll go. See ya later, buddy."

Xander never heard him leave. He had more pressing matters on his mind and in his hands.
Part Nineteen

Spike paced the length of the room and back again. Ten days. He had been living in this damn room for ten days and he had, up until now, never considered the mental stress of cabin fever before. Now he was considering it a lot. Even so far as to wonder how many people in recorded history had actually chewed off their own foot in order to attempt an escape.

Spike was beginning to look at himself like the troll that lived under the bridge, and right now he would have given anything for the Three Billy Goats Gruff to come clomping across to break the brain-numbing monotony of their daily life.

Xander was in the bath. Again. It seemed like the evening bath was the highlight of his day. He would go in there with a scowl on his face and come out over an hour later, loose, relaxed and grinning like he was the owner of a major secret that no one else
knew.

These long nightly soaks also gave Spike time for personal contemplation, and he was coming to the conclusion that this fucking train was never going to pull out of the station. He had come here to encourage Xander to rejoin the living and the world outside, but instead just the opposite was happening. Instead of Xander emerging from this cave, Spike had moved in.

It was time for a rethink. It wasn't that Spike was oblivious to Xander's pain, it was just that this cloistering-away was doing nothing to alleviate it. Spike wasn't sure what the next step should be but he knew if they didn't take it soon, Xander wouldn't be the only one moving into the loony bin.

One more pass to the window and back and Xander came breezing in. He had a grin on his face and the eye-patch was slightly askew. Spike scowled. If he hadn't known better, he would swear that was the same expression Xander used to wear right after a wild ride on Mr. Meaty's Magical Roller Coaster, as
he was so fond of calling it. Surely he wasn't.... Oh, please say he didn't.... Not when Spike was living like a nun!

"What the fuck do you do in there for so long?"

Without thinking, Xander's hand swiftly swung around and cupped his guilty pleasure as he tried for an expression of indignant martyr. "Taking a fucking bath. Do you mind? I have nothing else in life, can't I at least have a few private minutes at the end of the day for the luxury of a hot bath. I would think after all I have been through...."

Spike squinted his eyes as Xander continued on with his oft-repeated tirade of woe-is-me, and the picture suddenly became crystal clear. Spike wasn't running a fucking thing here. Xander was in the driver's seat and he was barreling down the Wacky-Doodle Highway at full speed ahead and, by Spike allowing it, he was riding shotgun.

"Oh for Christ's sake, Xander. Shut the fuck up."
"What?"

Spike's less-than-compassionate attitude took all the wind out of Xander's sails and he just blinked as Spike threw his hands in the air and ranted like a wild man.

"I said, knock it off. Jesus Q. Christ, Xan, don't you ever get tired of wearing that sackcloth? Brush the fucking ashes out of your hair. We have been here for ten days and the furthest I have gotten you out of this room is the front fucking porch."

Xander took a step back as a vowel-less sound escaped his lips. "Grk."

Finally, the boiling frustration cooled and Spike sat down on the corner of the bed as his tone softened.

"Look, Xan, I'm in this for the long haul, but I kinda expected the haul to at some point be back into society and we don't appear to be any closer to that goal. It isn't doing either of us any good to live
within these four walls and discuss nothing deeper than Willie Loomis and Dr. Hoffman."

"I like Dark Shadows."

Suddenly, a lightbulb snapped on over Spike's head and he had the perfect proposition.

"I know you do. I do too." Both men knew that was a bald-faced lie but neither of them challenged it as Spike continued and Xander waited suspiciously to see where this was going. "But you have to admit, staying hidden in this house isn't helping your mental state any. It isn't good for you. You need to get out and feel the sun on your skin. You need to get on with your life."

Xander began to hyperventilate as his mind filled in the unspoken words in Spike's statements. "Helping your mental state" translated to "You fucking crazy nut-case," and "You need to get on with your life" was the beginning of a sentence that ended "without me."
Immediately, Xander's hand brushed over his eyepatch and he dropped his head. He refused to beg but he wanted to. He really wanted to. Spike coming here was the rope he clung to. It was what kept him from drifting away. His love for the blond was the only tangible thing in Xander's life. But Xander was a bull-headed bastard. "Oh, well, excuse the fuck out of me. If you're so anxious to get back to that apartment of YOURS, don't let me keep you."

That was the perfect segue that Spike had needed to launch into his idea. Like any good adman, Spike knew that the purchase of this product was all in the presentation. So, he gave it his best. "That's it! Damn, Xan, great idea! You are a fucking genius!"

Xander scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. He smelled a rat and Spike was looking very Mickey Mouse at the moment.

"What the fuck are you...."

"A field trip! I need to drop my term papers off at
the college to get ready for my final exam next week and Da can't come by to get them. How about I load your self-flagellant arse up in the car. You can ride along while I make a pit stop at the college then we run by OUR flat. WE have a telly and we can eat a pizza while we watch Dark Shadows."

Immediately, a feeling of terror raced through Xander's body with a cold shiver. Out? Spike wanted to go out? Xander turned his head as he fought the urge to shout a resounding "NO!" Logically, he had known all along that at some point he would have to step off the porch. He had just thought that the first few times would be under the cover of darkness.

Although actually he was feeling quite a bit stronger lately. His daily chats with Riley had helped considerably, as did the regular wanks. While he knew Riley was a figment of his imagination, his presence eased Xander's guilty conscience and allowed him to discuss things that he never would with Spike.
Spike. His world. His life. Crawling into bed and lying next to him at night was the best part of Xander's day. He would roll over and face the sleeping man and just watch him. He would sometimes carefully scoot close enough that he could feel the warm breath puff into his face as Spike snored. It was like a cloud from heaven. He could almost taste those soft, pink lips.

No doubt. Spike was the man he would love till the day he died. Too bad Spike would not feel the same once the truth came out. Riley said that Spike would understand but fuck, Riley was just the specter of an insane mind so what the hell did he know?

Xander glanced up towards the window. The porthole to the outside. It was dark out and nothing could be seen but his own ugly reflection mirrored back at him, yet he knew what was out there. Reality. Life. Maybe.... "I don't know. I'm not ready to go on campus. People might see...."

Negotiations! That was far better than Spike could have hoped for. "Okay, yes, all right. How about
this? How about I drop you off at the flat. You can watch the telly while I run over to the college. On the way back, I will pick up the pizza and we will have lunch."

Xander scratched his nuts as he thought over the proposal before making one more counteroffer. "Hmmmmm. Well, I don't know. Are you getting chips? How long will you be gone? What happens if you don't come back? What will happen to me?"

Spike's heart twisted at the small-boy tone in Xander's voice. This was a man that stood strong in the jungles of a foreign land and fought for his life. Now, he was afraid. Afraid to be alone. Afraid of being abandoned.

Spike gave no indication of pity when he answered. "No sweat. I'll get chips, the kettle-cooked kind you like, a couple bottles of Coke and maybe even some chocolate chip cookies for dessert. The college is about ten minutes from the flat so, ten over, ten back and say....fifteen there. Twenty to
get the food. Now, I know that they're showing two episodes of Shadows back to back which means sixty minutes of vampire goodness. We can time it so that you can watch Barnabas bite someone's arse and I'll return before he's back in the coffin. What do you say?"

"Um. I...ah...okay."

"YES!!"

**Part Twenty**

Spike was as excited as a kid on Christmas morning. They were going out! Out of the room, out of the house, out into the real world. It was something he had begun to think would never happen. He had been so charged up at the prospect that he had been wide awake when Xander slipped into bed with him, and still awake when the same man slid
out before dawn.

He had sung a rousing rendition of "Think" by Aretha Franklin, punching the air and shouting "THINK, think about whacha tryin' to do to me!" as he wildly gyrated and wiggled his bare arse down the hall toward the bathroom. Xander scowled, but despite his best efforts to remain sour, as soon as Spike was out of sight Xander had to grin and chuckle. It felt good to see Spike so silly. It felt normal. Then Xander remembered why his companion was so jubilant. They were going out. Out of the room. Dear Lord, out of the house.

Breakfast was a balancing of counter-weights. The faster Spike would shovel in his cornflakes, the slower Xander would dip his spoon into his floating pool of Cheerios. At one point, he began to scoop just one Cheerio at a time. Spike knew what he was doing and he wasn't about to allow this type of diversionary tactic.

"You have just three more minutes and approximately fifty-six more Cheerios. That works
out to almost nineteen Cheerios per minute. I suggest you get to chewing."

Xander frowned and plunged his spoon into the bowl, causing a small splash of milk to spittle out and onto the tablecloth. "Well, obviously you've switched your major to accounting."

Spike jumped up from the table as Jessica giggled at her boys. He headed for the steps but stopped and called back, "I'm getting my schoolwork. When I get back I expect you to be ready to go." He then darted up the steps before Xander could snip a nasty reply.

Xander grumbled but he hurried to finish eating. If he had to do this, he wouldn't do it hungry. He'd learned from his time in the jungle that you could never be sure when your next meal would come along.

The ensuing excursion was an experience in sensory overload for Xander. Starting with his climb into the woody. From the second he slid into the passenger's seat, he was flooded with memories
that the smell of the leather and wood invoked. He could almost close his eye and hear the roar of the ocean and the shouts of his friends waving to him on the sandy beach. It was the world he had loved. It was his stolen innocence and past. It caused a single tear to roll down his cheek.

Spike glanced over and made no comment as Xander subtly swiped his hand across his face. Instead, Spike chose to get Xander's attention back to the here and now. It helped tremendously that sitting in the passenger's seat allowed Xander's good ear to pick up Spike's voice without the discomfort of always having to turn his head.

"So, how does she look? She has a few more miles on her but I've done my best to keep her standing tall."

Xander sniffled and regained his composure. He ran his hand across the dashboard then checked his palm for any trace of dust or dirt. It came up clean. He then critically assessed the floor mat beneath his feet, and it occurred to him that either Spike was
very neat or no one had been Spike's shotgun recently. He liked the implication of that.

Next he twisted around to look into the back seat, and he checked himself before his mind could question the possibilities of any carnal escapades that may have taken place there in the last two years. Finally, he settled back in his seat and he actually smiled as he nodded his approval. "She looks great. You really did a good job with her."

Spike couldn't have been more pleased. He positively beamed with a joy and pride that was so overwhelmingly infectious that before he could stop himself, Xander smiled too. From there, the mood inside the vehicle relaxed considerably and Spike took on the vocation of travel guide, pointing out changes that had occurred in Sunnydale during the time Xander had been gone.

"See that row of buildings over there? That's what they call a strip mall. It's one long building that houses five different stores. Oh, you remember Mr. and Mrs. Kronk that lived there? Well she died and
he moved to a nursing home last winter. She was ninety-four and the newspaper said she died unexpectedly. I mean really, what the fuck. Isn't anything over ninety kinda expected?"

Xander had to giggle at that one. He had forgotten how entertaining his Spike could be. After that, despite his best efforts to remain stoic, he began to reluctantly join into the spirit of the day.

"When did that shoe store go out of business and what the fuck is a pot pourri?"

Spike looked in the direction Xander had indicated. "Oh, that happened about a year ago. Pot Pourri is one of those hippie stores. They sell beads, incense sticks, rolling papers, glass bongs, you know, shit like that for smoking dope. They can't legally sell marijuana but they do it in the back room and they can sell all the shit you need to roll it and puff it."

Xander nodded as he glanced out the side. When his mother's favorite butcher shop passed by, he craned his head to try and read the odd signs in the
"Gourmet meat?

"Oh, yeah. They sell quirky stuff. They have Troyer's Trail that they get from some Amish guy in Ohio and oh, my, god! You slice it up and eat it cold with Swiss cheese and crackers. It is to die for. We will have to get some."

Xander huffed and crossed his arms over his chest with an air of superiority. "Half the world is starving and eating cats and dogs and people in our country are serving bullshit like gourmet meats for Christ's sake."

Spike let the small serving of grouch roll off his back like pigeon poop. "Uh uh. No acting like an arsehole. Remember? That was part of the deal."

Xander blinked his confusion. He was the first to admit that his memory was somewhat diminished and damaged but he didn't recall an asshole clause in their negotiations about today's trip. Had he
really agreed to that? If so, he didn't want to appear
that he was not a man of his word and he didn't
want Spike to realize that Xander was a tad shaky in
the recollections department.

"Oh, yeah, sorry."

Immediately, Spike turned the woody onto Old Oak
Drive and he again launched into his tour guide
persona as Xander sat up in his seat and admired
the architecture of all the old magnificent mansions.
It was a part of the town Xander hadn't spent much
time in growing up, but it had always fascinated
him. As Spike began to speak, he held Xander's rapt
attention.

"This is the original part of town. It was built up
over a hundred years ago. The richest men from the
East came here and constructed these huge
mansions. They built them near the waterway of
the Pacific Ocean and they started the major
shipbuilding companies. They came here already
rich but they amassed huge fortunes. Gradually the
working town centered away from here. Then when
the stock market crashed in the Twenties, and with the introduction of income taxes, their fortunes fell away and a lot of these places were abandoned. They fell into terrible disrepair. About twenty years ago, a developer came in and bought them all up for next to nothing to convert into flats. They still have a lot of the original old-world charm and architectural beauty."

As Spike spoke, Xander hung on every word. The woody had slowed to a snail's pace and now just crept along the quiet, narrow, tree-lined streets. It was cool and green, and Xander cursed the lack of two eyes as he tried to look everywhere at once. The mansions were wood and red brick. Most had intricate scrollwork that had been lovingly restored around the eaves of the roofs and all had huge porches that wrapped around the front.

They were gigantic and impressive in an arrogant sort of way. Sadly, their opulence was diminished by steep outdoor stairways that ran up both sides of the mansions to allow private entrances to the renovated apartments. It was a shame and a
desecration.

Xander could easily imagine life in the last century. He could see rich husbands in high-collared white shirts and waistcoats. He could envision young girls in blond curls and long dresses, laughing and romping on the vast, flat front yards with purebred puppies and brushed white kittens. An extravagant life free of trials and tribulations. Before he could ask Spike any questions, he was surprised when the woody turned into one of the long sweeping driveways.

When they circled around to the rear of the property, Xander noticed that there was a large area of blacktop. Beyond that was an old-fashioned carriage house that had obviously also been put into service as a rental unit. Spike pulled into the spot of the parking lot that was marked with a neat, painted '3'.

He turned the key, shut off the engine and turned with an excited grin. "Well, here we are. Come on, I can't wait to show you."
Spike unlocked the front door and it swung wide open. He then stepped back and made a sweeping motion with his hand. Xander frowned and leaned over so that his good eye could look inside. He thought about refusing to go in but Spike was standing by with that hopeful, idiotic smile on his face and, considering that they were already here, Xander had to concede. With a huff of disinterest, he shrugged and crossed the threshold with Spike right on his heels.

"So? What do you think? Great, yeah?"

Xander stuffed his hands in his pockets and he began a slow, thorough perusal of the property. It was exactly as he had imagined it. And he had imagined it a million times.

All those days that he laid in the hospital, alone and in pain, his salvation had come in the form of Peggy,
a chubby Army nurse who had glanced at his letters when she stowed away his gear. He remembered the night she leaned over his bed on the pretense of fluffing his pillow and she whispered in his ear that she had a brother with a secret and a special friend. Xander admitted nothing but he didn't object as she sat by his side and read each letter that Spike sent.

The letters and the mental pictures they painted gave him hope. Not for himself, because he knew his own life was over, but for Spike. It gave him the sure knowledge that Spike was moving on and making a home for himself.

As Peggy read, Xander would lie quietly, and in his mind the apartment was constructed, room by room, detail by detail. Now, being here and actually seeing it, it was just as he had pictured.

They entered and Xander stopped in the open living room area. Spike simply zipped around him toward the kitchen. He jerked open the refrigerator door then took a fast peek in the cupboards before hustling back to where his boyfriend still waited.
"Okay, well, make yourself at home. There's soda in the fridge and some snacks on the shelf. You have about ten minutes till Dark Shadows comes on and I should be back before it's over. I'm sorry I never had a phone put in. Just couldn't afford it and I guess now that I'll lose the place at the end of the month, it's one less thing to deal with. If you do have a problem or if you need anything, Mrs. Backer, across the hall is...."

"I don't need anything."

Spike sighed. He had really hoped that when Xander saw the flat...well apparently his prickishness ran deep. Still, despite the less than whoopee reception, Spike was in a great mood. Just being out in the world again made him feel like a million pounds and a couple pence, and he wasn't about to let Xander's mood become infectious.

"Right, then. I'm out. I'm gone. Ta ta. Be back before you know it."
Xander remained rooted to where he stood as Spike breezed out and shut the door. For a couple minutes he didn't move, just in case this was a trick and Spike would charge back in to catch him doing...what? Xander wasn't sure but he wouldn't be snared that easily.

When the big, expected moment of "AHA!" didn't occur, Xander marginally relaxed. He eased over to the living area and he ran his hand across the back of the couch. It was plaid just like Spike had said, but the way the letters sounded, it was broken down and ready for the city dump. Xander tipped his head thoughtfully. It really didn't look bad at all.

Next, he wandered over to the kitchen. Small. Limited counter space. It would be hard for more than one person to be in here cooking at a time. Of course the way the kitchen was positioned, a person could sit on the sofa and still see and visit with whoever was fixing dinner. If that person was so inclined.

When his eye stopped on a doorway, he craned his
neck and he tried to recall the floor plan as it had been described. Bedroom? Xander decided the only way to be sure was to go look.

Hesitantly, he did.

It was, and it was wonderful. The room was cozy. In the center was a high, fluffy-looking double bed with a wedding-band quilt that he recognized as one his grandmother had made. His mother always kept it in her closet and told him that it would be given to him when he had his own place.

Xander was a little hurt. His mother had given it to Spike instead.

He walked over and pressed his hand down to test the bounciness of the bed. It was difficult to determine, so in the interest of scientific experimentation he jumped and landed on it. Grudgingly he had to admit that it was fucking perfect.

Just like Goldilocks, he had found the one that was
just right. He sprawled out. He did angel wings with his arms and legs and he rolled over and smelled the heavenly scent of Spike on the pillows. He flopped and flipped on the bed like a fucking fish just snatched from the pond.

When there was no question left as to the high quality of the comfort of the bed, Xander sighed and crawled off. He then used all his military training to assure the bed was smooth, wrinkle free and all traces of his romp were eliminated.

Then it looked too neat. So he worked a few well-placed wrinkles back in. Then took two back out. Then before he could scream in frustration, he hurried from the room.

Deciding that a pee before the start of his program would eliminated the need to break during the fang action, Xander moved into the bathroom. It was clean, simple and had a huge, big-enough-for-two claw-foot bathtub. After peeing, as he washed his hands he stared at himself in the mirror. He forced himself to look. He slowly removed his eye patch.
He leaned in for a really good inspection.

It was horrendous. It was sickening. It had been sewn shut and was now just a sunken, scarred monstrosity. Immediately he put the patch back in place and turned away.

At that point he noticed the clock on the kitchen wall and let out an unmanly "EEP." He had only two minutes before Barnabas would be lurking through the halls of Collinwood. Quickly he rushed over, grabbed a soda from the fridge and opened and slammed four cupboard doors before he found the cookies, all the time mumbling to himself that if he lived here he would move the snacks to the cupboard nearest the fridge. It was only fucking logical for Christ's sake!

He darted into the living room and dropped his goodies on the coffee table before snapping the TV dial to the 'on' position and the channel knob to 3. Then he plopped down on the very comfy sofa to wait while it warmed up.
"Nice place."

Xander had a cookie halfway to his mouth when the unwanted interruption stopped him. He turned his head to the side to see Riley perched on the back of the lounge chair with his feet on the seat. He was bent over as his arms rested on his thighs and that insufferable grin lit up his face.

"What the fuck are you doing here? I thought you lived in my bathroom."

Riley barked out a laugh and dropped to sit on the chair. "I don't technically 'live' anywhere but I can hang out wherever I want. So what do you think? Great place, no?"

Xander shrugged as he took another scan of the high ceilings, classic exposed brick and quality trim and woodwork. "Yeah, I s'pose. Doesn't much matter though. Spike said he can't pay the rent after this month so he'll have to move his stuff out."

Riley didn't seem surprised by this statement,
almost as though he already knew Spike's situation. "That so? Where will he go? You don't want him to live with you at your parents' house, so what is he supposed to do?"

Xander stared at the television screen as Caroline rushed down the dim hallways in slow motion while her long skirt and blond curls flowed and flapped behind her. He took a drink from his soda bottle and wished it were something stronger.

"I guess.... I don't know. What are you suggesting?"

Riley reached over toward the plate of cookies, but Xander slid them away. Riley responded by flipping Xander the finger. "Selfish prick. What I'm suggesting is that you have a lot of money. Why don't you...."

Xander slammed his soda bottle down on the table with a resounding 'smack.'

"What the fuck are you talking about? I don't have any money and even if I did, why the fuck would I
give it to him to pay for a fucking love nest where he can bring a long string of tweeks and male trollops?"

As always, Riley took no offense. Even dead, he was an easygoing bastard. "You don't have any money? Hmm. Didn't you send home two years' worth of military pay for your mom to put in the bank? Were you planning on investing that in the stock market or maybe opening a business of your own. Xander Harris, entrepreneur?"

Xander popped a cookie in his mouth and sprayed crumbs as he muttered, "Fuck you."

Riley slowly unfolded himself as he rose from the chair and wandered across the room. Xander ignored Barnabas' weekly whipping of Willie with that nasty sounding riding crop, and he watched as Riley stopped and leaned against the bedroom doorway.

"Nice-looking bed in there. That's the kind of bed that's just made for two horny men to fuck and suck
and all that other good stuff you guys do together. And don't tell me that you can't, cause I've seen you wrestle that damn thing till it spits up and faints in your hand."

Xander stuck his tongue out but made no comment, so Riley continued. "Just seems to me like Spike has done a lot for you since you got home. Kicking out a couple months of rent so he has a place to go when you run him off is only fair."

On the TV screen, Victoria screamed and passed out.

Part Twenty-Two

Spike was absolutely vibrating with the thrill of a man just paroled from prison. He had not realized how oppressive the last ten days of living in the doom and gloom and confinement of that house
and that room had been, till now. Now, as he walked across the glorious campus of the University of Sunnydale. Now, as he felt the warmth of the sun on his face and heard the sounds of birds singing and students laughing, shouting and talking. He felt human again. He felt real. It was normalcy. It was life.

He strolled the winding paths, appreciating all the things he had taken for granted. The campus was old and, as such, was dotted by huge mature oak and maple trees that supplied a canopy of cool oasis and soft, earthy smells.

The chapel bell in the distant tower was ringing, signaling the two o'clock hour, and the band practice near the football field blared off-key, stopped and tried again. It was all the sounds of college life that Spike had disregarded over the past two years that now resounded like the very harps of heaven.

With a lightness to his step and a song in his heart, Spike waved to people he knew as he trotted down
the familiar paved walkways between the student hall, the chemistry lab and around toward the administration buildings. Although he knew he was on a tight time budget, Spike had hoped to catch his father for a few minutes, before checking in with the Student Supervisor and the Dean to confirm the completion of his assignments and to schedule his finals.

"Spike! Hey, Spike! Wait up!"

Spike stopped and turned in the direction of the voice calling his name. When he saw who it was, he grinned and threw his hand high in the air to wave.

"Mike! Hello!"

The buff, athletic sandy blond picked up his pace to a trot and he quickly reached the spot where Spike was waiting.

"Hey, damn. You've been gone a long time."

Spike smiled broadly and clutch...
to his chest. Just as his friend arrived a cool spring breeze brushed past him, drifting the sweet scent of Mike's aftershave across Spike's nose and straight to his dick.

"I've missed you. After the third day you missed chem lab I went to your father to see if anything was wrong. Professor Giles said you were tending to a sick friend. I'm sorry to hear that. Is there anything I can do?"

Spike's villainous willy squirmed in his pants as his brain conjured up all sorts of things that Mike could do. Over the past two years he and Mike had enjoyed a few coffee dates, with the understanding that Spike was spoken for and unwilling to risk his relationship for a fast fling.

Mike, on the other hand, had been persistent. The handsome lacrosse player was unashamed of his crush on Spike and he had been logical and reasonable in his speeches that eerily mimicked Tara's explanation of free love. Only Spike knew that nothing was free. Every action came with a
price and this one was far too expensive.

But now, standing here in the freedom of the
campus and far from the oppressive situation that
he had to return to, his body was launching a
campaign of coax and convince. It made promises of
secrecy and sexual satisfaction that would go
undiscovered. It squirmed in his nuts and it filled his
dick with blood as his cock begged for a deviation
from the familiarity and boring repetition of the
same five fingers.

Surprised by Spike's silence and sensing a hesitancy
in the expected "no," Mike's heart pitty-patted with
hope. His voice was breathless and persuasive.
"Come on, Spike. It's early. You and I can go over to
the Student Union and have a cup of coffee. Just a
visit. I know you don't want to go on a 'date' but,
fuck, there's no harm in a couple guys spending
some time together. Maybe go back to my place
and take a fast tumble or two. No hearts or flowers.
Just a roll in the bed and a couple hot shots of cum.
Shit, wouldn't that feel good? I want to make you
feel good, Spike."
Spike dropped his face to hide the pink hue that flushed his cheeks. He was stunned and ashamed at how tempting that sounded. "Mike, I...."

Mike took a step closer and dropped his voice to barely above a whisper. "We can be quick. You would be back here in less than an hour. Fuck. You know how I feel about you. Shit, when I think about sliding into your hot, tight...."

"Over here!! I got it!!"

The laughing voice off to Spike's left caught his attention and he turned to look. What he saw, as Mike continued to speak, was a senior whose name Spike couldn't recall. He was older, tall, strong, dark haired and buff. He was laughing and shuffling backwards as he threw his hands in the air for his teammate to toss him a football. He looked like Xander. Like Xander did two years ago. He was healthy, carefree and all the things that Xander deserved to be today.
"......and taste your lips while I feel the heat inside your body."

Spike's attention returned to the offer on the table, but now his head was back in the driver's seat with his heart riding shotgun and his libido locked in the trunk.

"No. I'm sorry, Mike, but I can't. God knows I want to, but I can't. Hey, you know what? I have a hell of an idea. How do you feel about blind dates?"

Mike's face scrunched up in disappointment and confusion at the sudden switched track. "Blind date?"

Spike reached in and tore a corner off a page of his spiral notebook. He scrawled a name and number across it and he handed it over to Mike with a big grin on his face. He didn't know why he hadn't considered this before. Maybe deep in his unconscious he was keeping Mike in reserve in case...but there was no in case. There was only commitment. Unquestioning, undying commitment.
"Yeah. Give this guy a call and tell him who gave you the number. He recently broke up with a bloke that he knew from high school. He likes big athletic sports types who don't mind being on top. He's a great guy but I think he's interested in a long term thing, so if all you want is...."

"No. No, shit, I would love to have a real thing. Geesh, waking up in our boxers in the morning all the way to stemmin' the rose at midnight. Hell, yeah, I'll call him today. Penndelton. Todd Penndelton?"

Spike nodded. "Yeah, we just call him Penn."

Mike waved the scrap of paper in the air and he shouted a 'Thanks' before turning to dart off in the direction of the campus pay phones. Spike sighed and grinned. He had no regrets or second thoughts as he trotted off toward his father's faculty office. Everyone deserved a chance a true happiness.

"William."
Rupert rushed over and pulled his son into his arms. Two years of marriage with the very physically demonstrative Jenny had loosened him up considerably and he found that he enjoyed the hugs and kisses more than he would have imagined. Spike still found it funny but certainly not unpleasant. He returned the embrace enthusiastically.

"How are you? How is Xander? Is there any progress? Are you two ready to move to the flat? Is he here with you? Is he...."

Spike laughed at the barrage of questions and he threw his hands up in protest. "Whoa. Wait. No. I'm here by myself. I have completed my assignments and if they are all approved, I can schedule the final exams. I'm on my way to see the Dean now. I think he's better. Xander, not the Dean. He isn't drinking as much and he comes out of his room for most of the day. We're talking more but I think he's still depressed, which is understandable. He still won't let me see his face without that damn eyepatch but
if it makes him feel more secure, that's fine. As for the flat, it's still mine till the end of the month and he's there now. We're going to have lunch there. I think that's a huge step, don't you?"

Rupert tried to read the truth in his son's eyes but found them guarded and masked. It was hard to tell if things really were better or if Spike just wished them to be, so he just smiled and nodded. "I do. Well, as soon as you believe him to be up to it, Jenny has issued a standing invitation and Dru misses you terribly. We would love to have you both over for dinner."

Spike grinned. "That would be bloody brilliant. I hope it's soon. Well, I still have several stops and then I need to get back, so kiss Jenny and Dru for me and tell them I hope to see them soon. I love you, Da."

Rupert's eyes stung and his voice cracked with emotion as his son hugged him once more before heading for the doorway.
"I love you too, William. I love you too."

~*~*~*~*~

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"Come in? Oh, yes, William. Right on time. Excellent. Punctuality is important, Mr. Giles."

"Thank you sir."

Spike stepped into the Dean's office and he took the chair across the huge, imposing desk while he awaited the verdict. He felt like a ten year-old called to the principal's office.

The Dean took several minutes to review the paperwork and reports on his desk before removing the spectacles from his nose and turning his full attention to the young man who wisely waited silently.
"Well, William, I must say, when I agreed to this unorthodox arrangement, I had my doubts but you have proven them to be unfounded. Each of your professors has given high praise to your assignments in both content and timeliness. You have met and exceeded all of the expectations placed on you and you have successfully achieved passing, nay, not just passing but exemplary marks. We have met and coordinated a schedule of final exams that enables you to test-out all of your courses in one day, if you believe yourself to be able to do that."

Spike was thrilled. It was better than he had hoped. He had passed all of his classwork and in one single day could put this academic year behind him.

"Yes. Yes sir, I do believe I am prepared to do that."

Dean Rayne nodded and flipped through his stack of papers before he withdrew one particular sheet which he slid across the desk.

"Fine. Fine. Your exams are scheduled for the day
after tomorrow commencing with Geometry at eight A.M. and finishing with World History at four. Congratulations, Mr. Giles. And good luck."

With that dismissal, Spike grinned broadly, accepted the sheet of paper and the praise and he backed towards the door. He nodded and bowed as though leaving a throne room and the King himself as he babbled his thanks and assurances.

When he was out, he leapt into the air with a 'whooppee' and a butt-shaking dance. He then took off at a dead run toward the woody. He had a pizza to buy and a boyfriend to celebrate with.

Part Twenty-Three

"So, could you ever see yourself living in a place like this?"
Xander blew on his cooling cup of tea as he considered Riley's question. He padded sock-footed back into the living room and plopped down on the couch. It wasn't that he thought this fucking apartment was the Taj Mahal or anything, it was just that Spike had told him to make himself at home. So after kicking off his shoes, he had searched the cupboards for a box of tea bags that he was certain Spike would have on hand and he brewed a cup.

"Pftt. And do what? Get a job and go to work every day? I guess that depends. Is the Jolly Roger pulling into bay soon and are they taking applications for a pirate? Would I have to get a peg leg and a parrot? Don't those fucking birds shit down your back when they perch on your shoulder? Oh I know, I could hire on as a cyclops in the next Vincent Price movie. Me and Godzilla could go head-to-head. The fight might not last long but the kiddies in the theatres would sure scream their heads off at the terrifying sight of the battling monsters."
Riley dramatically threw himself down on the easy chair and groaned as though he were in unimaginable pain. Xander sipped his tea calmly and ignored the histrionics that the phantom was engaging in. Finally the ghost sat up and, leaning over, rested his clasped hands on his thighs. "You know Xander, Spike is right. You're getting a little tiresome with this repetitious, whiny, feel-sorry-for-me attitude. You at least have a future. Whether you live like a fucking troll in your room at your parents' house or if you move in with your boyfriend, it's your choice. As long as you have a life, you have a choice. Which is more than some of us have."

Xander set down his cup and he growled. "That's low. Flaunting your deadness is just wrong and totally unfair. You sound like it was my choice and it wasn't. Besides, how do you know what Spike says? Have you been talking to Spike? I thought you were here for me, not him."

Riley shrugged. "Maybe I'm here for me. Maybe I have a few unfinished things to do, some loose ends
to tie up, before I go on. Maybe I could actually get out of this dump faster if you would stop being an asshole and just let go of me."

Xander blinked. "What?"

"XAN! Hey, I'm back and I have two large pepperoni pizzas from Zifer's Pizza. Come on and grab some while it's still hot."

Xander's head snapped over to where Spike had just burst in the door with the square red boxes of heavenly smells, then back to what was now an empty chair. Riley was gone. Was he, or had he never been there? Xander wanted to worry about his sanity, but the presence of his good friend was so natural and comforting that he just refused to give it deep thought.

Scooting off the couch, he hurried into the kitchen just as Spike was lifting the box lids and reaching in for the first greasy slice.

"Ouch, ouch, ouch. Damn. That fucker is hot." Spike
laughed as he sucked a spot of melted cheese off his reddened thumb. He noticed that Xander was shoeless and had apparently taken Spike's advice to make himself at home. It pleased Spike more than he could say and only elevated his good mood even more.

Xander didn't answer, but he waited by patiently while Spike chatted about how his meetings at the university went while he grabbed a couple plates out of the overhead cupboard. He then accepted the one that was handed to him and he followed Spike's lead to load three slices on his plate before going back to the living room.

Spike sat down on the end of the couch and Xander sat at the far end. He would have chosen the easy chair but his tea cup was already on the coffee table, and besides, the chair was Riley's.

"...so, all the homework was done and graded. All I have to do to finish out the semester is take the final exams on Thursday."
Xander took a big bite of his pizza and the flavor exploded on his tongue. It was the first pizza he had had since leaving home and no one on earth could make Italian like Mary Zifer. He shoved it in and reached for another piece. Halfway through the second slice, he realized that Spike had stopped talking and was apparently expecting some sort of response.

"Huh? What?"

"I said, how was your show today? Did Victoria protect her shaky virginity from the stable boy?"

"Oh, yeah, actually I wasn't paying too much attention. Can I ask you something?"

Spike was caught off guard by the openness in Xander's tone and sincerity in his face. He couldn't imagine what the query could be but just the fact that he would ask put Spike on high alert. It had to be vital, considering its usurping of Dark Shadows.

"Yeah, sure, anything."
Xander laid his half-eaten slice back on the plate and he wiped his mouth with the paper napkin while he considered the wording he wanted to use. Finally he turned and fully faced his companion.

"What would you do if you were me?"

Spike was slightly startled. That was not the question he would have expected. In fact it was nowhere near what he had thought would have been on Xander's mind. It was a question that, despite its simplicity, was too broad and complex not to require some refinement and definition.

"As far as?"

Xander dropped all guard as he stared directly into the clear blue eyes. There was no disgust in Spike's expression. There was only confusion and concern, and although Xander couldn't imagine what had dragged this out of his mouth, now that it was on the table it needed to be dished up and served. Perhaps for Riley. Perhaps for his own sanity. For
whatever reason, Xander had to see this through.

"Everything. If you were damaged, ugly and disabled, where would you start? How would you go about getting your life back? I'm not stupid. I know I can't ask my parents to support me forever but what can I possibly do? Why did this happen to me? I don't understand, Spike. I just don't understand."

Spike held his breath as a whirlwind of thoughts and options spun through his brain. He would not insult Xander with a disrespectful minimization of the situation, as in "It isn't that bad" or "Everything will be all better very soon." At the same time, Spike couldn't imagine the proposed reversal. What exactly would he do?

He didn't answer in haste. He knew this was a major turning point in their struggle to find a way back to each other, and he prayed he wouldn't fuck this up.

Finally he took a deep breath and a giant leap.
Spike tentatively scooched over till he sat right next to Xander. When he was not rebuked, he reached out and took both of Xander's hands in his and he held on tightly. The pizza was forgotten and the opening credits of the next soap opera ironically announced, "Like sands through the hourglass, these are the days of our lives."

"I can't imagine what I would do, but to be honest, trying to conjure up a set of circumstances and solutions for what I would do seems counter-productive. I think we need to focus on you and what you are going to do. Now the way I see it, your biggest obstacle is you. You want things to be the way they were, and at the risk of being cruelly blunt, they aren't and they won't be. Sometimes you just have to play the hand you are dealt and stop wishing for four aces."

Xander was slightly taken aback. He had expected promises and generalities. Maybe even a diversion or two. Stark reality wasn't what he thought Spike would give him, but surprisingly, it was just what Xander wanted. With a slight nod of Xander's head,
Spike continued.

"Now, from the research I've done at the university library, the Army offers programs both medical and financial for returning war vets, and maybe down the road we'll explore them. For now, fuck them. They got you into this mess but I think we can do you a better job of finding your way out."

Xander swallowed. His eye grew wide and his heart skipped a beat as it deciphered the unfamiliar feeling of hope. "Okay, but how.... I mean what...."

Spike's face took on the serious expression of a man contemplating world domination while he prioritized their necessities. Once he did, he got excited and his voice reflected it. He began to bubble.

"All your life, Xander, you've defined yourself by your physicality. You were a football star, a basketball player, shit, you were the Brown Bodies surfing champ of 1965! You were an Adonis! It's what you did and how you saw yourself. Now, to be
honest, you're a wreck and it has nothing to do with your scars. You are underweight, your legs look like you're riding a chicken and that plump ass that I used to love to use as a pillow is now flat as a pancake."

Xander frowned. He might have asked for honesty but that was way more blunt than he had expected. "Hey."

Spike dismissed Xander's objections with a wave of the hand. Spike was on a roll and wouldn't be stopped. "We need to take this on as if it were a real job with goals to achieve and milestones to reach. Once we get you in better shape on the outside, it will improve your confidence on the inside. Speaking of which, you need a good non-military haircut and, please, get rid of that tacky welfare-looking eyepatch. I say we get a nice, clean, black satin one. No, two. That way when one is in the cleaners...."

Immediately, Xander's hand went to his missing eye and the tattered piece of cotton that covered it.
Xander was not sure how he felt about Spike so openly discussing Xander's most painful, raw humiliation as though it were yesterday's newspaper.

"Jesus, Spike. You ever consider taking a course in diplomacy over at that fucking college?"

Spike relaxed and chuckled. "Nope."

Part Twenty-Four

The conversation between them regarding Xander's situation was like a kerosene fire. It had flared fast and hot in an explosion of ideas and possibilities before quickly burning itself out and collapsing into a pile of hot ashy thoughts that promised to smolder for a long time.

Now, the men were silent as they finished their
dinner. Neither noticed or cared that the pizza was cooled to the point that the cheese had coagulated and the crust had turned dry and hard. It was unimportant, as both men were lost in their own mental musings and emotions. This time though, unlike all the days before, the lack of conversation was neither twitchy nor uncomfortable.

Spike tried to suss out what could have occurred while he was gone to cause the sudden crack in the dam that held back the Great Xander River but feared that too close an examination would again cause the floodgates to slam shut. Oral gift horses and all. So he smiled and he took another bite.

They were here in their flat, sitting side by side, knees touching and enjoying their time together. The telly chirped in the background as Maxwell House sang a catchy jingle about being good to the last drop and a news alert promised minute-by-minute coverage of Bobby Kennedy's appearance at the Democratic National Convention.

Spike and Xander's companionability was a major
step in the right direction, and for now, Spike couldn't ask for anything more.

Xander, on the other hand, knew what had brought about his trickle of trust and openness. As subtly as is possible for a one-eyed, half-deaf man to be, Xander glanced around for any trace of his ghostly friend as he mumbled, "Happy now?" Riley neither appeared nor did he reply.

Reluctantly, though, Xander had to confess that it felt as if a stone wall had been lifted from his back. It killed him to admit it, but perhaps Riley had been right. Xander had forgotten how good it felt to just sit and talk with Spike.

When they were down to the last couple slices, Spike slumped back, groaned and rubbed his belly. "Oh, fuck. If I eat one more bite, I think I may explode."

Xander dropped his face shyly and smiled. "Yeah, me too. Can I help you clean up?"
"I would damn well hope so."

Spike laughed as he jumped to his feet and he held out his hand. After a pause that had Spike wondering if he had misread the signals, Xander finally reached up and locked grips. With an exaggerated grunt, Spike heaved the bigger man to his feet and together they began collecting paper plates, napkins, soda bottles and the nearly empty red box.

"Where can I toss these?"

Spike waved his hand in the direction of a far corner of the kitchen where Xander spotted a tall kitchen trash can. Before throwing away the debris, he noticed a large banner had been stuffed into the bottom of the can. He paused, knowing it was wrong to be nosy but still overcome with curiosity about every aspect of Spike's life here in this apartment.

Glancing over his shoulder, Xander observed Spike back in the living area. He was busily wiping the
crumbs from the coffee table and scraping cheese solids from the surface. Xander knew that would take a while and he gave in to his urge to snoop. Setting the pizza remains on the counter, Xander pulled the paper streamer out and read the cheerful lettering.

WELCOME HOME XANDER

Immediately, Xander's good mood deflated and the now-familiar guilt seeped in. He stared at the neat, handwritten words as he imagined Spike sitting in this very room, carefully, earnestly making sure that it was neat and just right.

"It doesn't matter, Xander."

Xander's head snapped up and turned in the direction of the man who now stood across the room from him. He then looked back down at the crinkled paper in his hands. "I'm sorry. You must have had such high hopes for my return. You must have imagined this bright, happy new life where we would pick up just where we left off. Sometimes I
forget that when I got myself fucked up, I ruined your life too. I'm sorry, Spike. I'm sorry I let this happen. No one would blame you if you walked away and...."

Spike closed the gap between them in a blink, and after tossing the banner back in the trash, he wrapped his arms around the wounded man and he pulled him as close as was physically possible. After just a second's hesitation, Xander too embraced his lover and together they began to cry.

It was cleansing. It was cathartic.

The physical contact stirred memories of love, familiarity and mutual support. It filled a gap in their hearts and lives that no one but each other could, and they clung on for dear life.

Finally, as the sorrow and regret that had spilled over began to drain away, Xander sniffled and pulled back. His weakness was an embarrassment to him but when he lifted his head expecting to find pity, he instead found his face cupped in Spike's
smaller, gentle hands and his lips warmed by the other man's kiss.

It wasn't a charity kiss. There was no implication of food stamps or welfare in it. It began with a soft intent of romance but instantly ramped up toward "Oh, fuck YES!" before either man could give it the introspective reflection that each of their actions seemed to require lately.

This was instinctive. This was hands on faces, backs of heads, clutching shoulders, fumbling fingers. It was heads tipped to the left, then lungs gasping for air and mouths diving back into the right. It was bumped noses. Shuffling feet that positioned themselves to line up in a nearly straight line. Toe, heel, toe, heel. It was grunts, groans, pants and tented pants.

It was hips canted forward. Whines and hard-ons seeking, searching and bumping.

Then it was tongues. Licking each other with a welcome home that was far more appealing and
sincere than words written on a wrinkled sign. It sent the hands lower and encouraged them to cup the other's ass, to hold it firmly in place as they launched into a serious hump and grind.

The kisses stopped. Forgotten. Set aside for later. Heads tipped downward to stare at cocks they couldn't actually see and the rhythm of their dance went from a two step to a bumping, pressing, perverted version of Chubby Checker's twist.

Then Spike's hand turned rascally. As it cupped the very arse that he had complained about just an hour earlier, it slid even further and he ran the back of his thumb down into the crack of that pancake-flat rump. The reaction was instantaneous. Xander's forehead dropped onto Spike's shoulder and with an "Ugh" and a "Oh, shit! Oh shit" his dick jerked, twitched, and unloaded a hot, wet stream of semen pooling into Xander's baggy jeans.

Both men froze. Hands stopped. Hips ceased. Trouser snakes wiggled, squirmed and spit up
happily again and again as though they had been holding gallons of love juice in reserve for just such an occasion.

Slowly, the men's hands lowered and they crept a small step back, separating as they continued to stare at the growing wet spots on the front of their pants. Spike was in slightly worse shape as his dampness began to trickle and darken down one leg. For him, abstinence had been a tad longer.

Now, it is a scientific fact that post-sexual euphoria and guilty embarrassment cannot co-exist in a gay relationship. Because its base is found only in massive doses of estrogen and totally lacking in testosterone, sin, blame and regret could not disrupt this amazing moment.

Unfortunately, physical discomfort could.

"Yuck."

Xander's nose wrinkled up at the smell and the sticky wet spot that was already cooling and drying,
causing his underwear to adhere to his pubic hair. Spike sucked his stomach in and he pulled the waistband of his trousers out to peek down at the ugly slime.

"Yeah. I think we need a bath. Wanna jump in together? It's a big tub."

Spike waggled his eyebrows but quickly saw the curtain of doubt and insecurity drop over Xander's eye. Spike smiled. It didn't matter. They had already taken a giant leap forward and if that was all Xander could do for one day, hell, it was more that Spike had dared hope. "Tell you what. How about if I go first. I'll be quick and then dress in my room while you clean up. By the time you're done, I'll have us a nice cup of tea brewed in the kitchen. Sound good?"

Xander grinned. He shook his one leg and he tried to adjust his softening dick into a less obnoxious position. "Yeah. Thanks."

Spike scampered, bowlegged, off toward the
bathroom. When he got there, he stopped and turned around. "Hey, I have an idea. Why don't we stay here tonight? We could watch TV. Visit. Maybe play cards. I haven't kicked your arse in Spades in a long time. What do you think?"

Xander tipped his head as he considered the offer. On the surface, it sounded like an excellent idea and one he would have jumped on, but he had other things on his mind. He was anxious to speak to his mother about his financial situation and not ready to mention it to Spike. He didn't want to offer to pay the rent if he didn't have that much put back. He wished he had paid closer attention but at the time, struggling to just survive in the jungle, a monthly pay allotment going home to a bank in Sunnydale seemed distant, faraway and unimportant.

"Um, no. I don't think so. I need to go home. Maybe we could come back another time."

It was a sharp pin in the balloon of Spike's good mood. "Oh, yeah, sure."
Spike turned quickly around so Xander wouldn't see the hurt on his face. Home. Xander wanted to go home. He didn't realize that Spike already was home.

Part Twenty-Five

After arriving back at his parents' house, Xander had wasted no time in grabbing his clean clothes and hurrying down the hallway for his evening constitutional. Conversation in the car had been limited. It consisted mainly of one- or two-word questions which elicited incoherent grunts or unrelated responses. After the first mile, each man drifted off into his own world of thoughts.

For Spike, it was totally bewildering. Hadn't they just gotten off together? Didn't that indicate a certain step taken in the right direction? Yet now
they seemed to be back to square one. Silence and separation. It was depressing.

Unaware of Spike's hurt feelings, Xander's brain spun with new ideas and plans. This was a possible chance to pay back a debt the size of Mt. Everest. Spike had done so much for him and this was an opportunity to give just a fraction in return.

He hadn't been excited about anything in a long time. It felt good. Of course the orgasm that had pumped off and into his pants had felt damn good too. In general, Xander was feeling pretty fucking fan-tabulous.

Xander grinned. The room was quiet except for the soft splish-splash of the hot, hot water in the tub as he slowly, gingerly eased himself in. With a happy sigh, he slid down until the back of his head was nearly submerged and his shaggy hair floated to the sides like seaweed.

The perky yellow bathroom was damp, steamy and muggy, but unlike the jungle, this was a clean, fresh
type of moist fog. It opened the pores and stimulated the sweat glands. The humidity left streams of water running down the plaster fish that hung on the walls and it overlaid the surface of the mirror with thousands of tiny water droplets that charitably concealed his reflection

"You were right. The apartment was nice."

Xander dipped the wash cloth in the water and squeezed it to dribble warmth all over his exposed chest. When he got no reply to his comment, he turned his head in the direction of the toilet seat and was surprised to find it empty. It had become an expected nightly ritual. He would take a long, hot bath and visit with his old friend until the water cooled and their snippy, old arguments became repetitive and redundant.

It was a good-natured back and forth. There was no sanctimonious preaching in Riley's counseling sessions that forced Xander to take a hard look at himself, and there was no angry intent in Xander's 'Fuck you' responses. It was an exchange that
Xander looked forward to as much for the companionship of his good friend as for the masturbatory way in which it ended.

Sometimes they just chatted. They talked about their adventures in Nam and as they interjected humor into it, some of the fear and horror began to melt away. Riley, much to Xander's dismay, seemed to have a near photographic memory for all the embarrassing screw-ups and bad ideas that Xander had exhibited while in the foreign land.

He taunted Xander over the grub-eating incident and even had the gall and bad taste to humiliate Xander by bringing up their drunken night in the Loi-Ta village and the unfortunate goat incident. Apparently a dead Riley had no diplomacy or shame.

In playful retaliation Xander had, on more than one night, tossed his soapy washcloth across the room in the direction of ghost-Riley's head in an effort to shut his friend up, only to have the wet rag hit the wall with a 'splat!' The phantom would then roll his
eyes at Xander's stupidity.

Finally, when it was time to call it a night, Riley's voice would drop to a low whisper. At first, it seemed strange to Xander that he could hear his friend at all, considering Riley was sitting on his deaf side, but some things reject introspection.

At that point, Xander would close his eye as Riley began to speak, and the subject of his dissertation was always the same. Spike. Spike's love for Xander. Spike's loyalty and positive character traits. Then, bastard that he was, Riley would slither off his throne and ease over till his lips were all but pressed against Xander's bad ear and his choice of categories would switch.

"I'll take sexy as fuck for $100, Mr. Trebek."

Riley then launched into a detailed running of everything from the top of Spike's blond, soft hair down to his bony toes and painted pink toenails. Which, while those areas were interesting enough, it was the everything in between that really got
Xander's trolling motor started.

Riley went into long drawn-out sermons that preached about the heavenly feel of that long, hooded piece of sweet-meat and the ecstasy that it drove Xander to when it was inserted, swallowed or even just pressed against Xander's own. Riley muttered about a certain small puckered opening that, like the pearly gates, led to heaven on earth.

It seemed to Xander that Riley used a lot of biblical comparisons. Understandable under the circumstances and nothing that dampened or diminished the results as each word went straight to Xander's cock.

By the time Xander was a whimpering mass of jellyfish, lathering and stroking his carp, Riley would stand with an insufferable smirk on his mug and then gradually fade away. At first, it slightly intrigued Xander that someone as straight as Riley always claimed to be would have such a good working knowledge of male-to-male copulation but in the end, who really cared.
Certainly not Xander who was enjoying nightly orgasms.

But tonight Riley was not there.

It was a disappointment. Not so much for the lack of sex talk but for the fact that Xander was full of thoughts that he wanted to bounce off the not-quite-there buddy. While he still wasn't convinced that this was the right move, he knew he could trust Riley to point out all sides of the issue that Xander may have not considered.

But Riley still wasn't here. That meant that Xander would have to decide this alone.

Disappointed, Xander slid downward until his face was submerged before popping back out and slicking is hair straight back. Maybe Spike was right. Maybe he did need a haircut. The fact was, he hated it this long and shaggy but where would he go? Sitting in a chair with a plastic bib over his body and every man in the room staring at his eye, or
lack there-of, sent chills of revulsion down his spine.

Maybe Spike would do it. Or his mother. With scissors. Or dog clippers.

Fuck it. Long was the style right now.

Climbing out of the tub, Xander pulled the plug and drained the scummy water. Before he could cringe or beat himself up, he went to the mirror and swiped the fog off the glass. He then took a good, dispassionate look. He had only one eye. Yup. There it was. It was no better than it was but it was no worse. It simply was what it was.

So he shaved, and combed his hair. He secured his eye patch and he dressed in his clean underwear. As he did, he scowled at the military perfection of his white, bland boxers and he idly wondered if his mother had left his pre-Nam Superman boxers in his dresser drawers. Maybe he would look tomorrow.

Tomorrow. He couldn't wait. When Spike was taking
his morning bath, Xander would slip downstairs and talk with his mother. He hadn't really visited with her one-on-one since he came back, but this was too important an issue for embarrassing awkwardness. He needed to know his financial situation before he could go any further with his plans.

It seemed appropriate that tomorrow was Wednesday. It harkened back to the days of the old Mickey Mouse Club. Wednesday was Anything Can Happen Day.'

When he was clean, combed and shaved, he hung up his wet towel and dropped his dirty clothes in the hamper. He then traipsed down toward their bedroom. When he entered, he was surprised to find the lights already out and Spike apparently sound asleep.

Xander eased over towards his nest and he crouched down to stare at the closed face.

"Spike?"
Xander's voice was soft. A quiet question puffed on warm air. When he got no response, he glanced over at his nest then back to the warm, welcoming bed. Before he dared, he tried again.

"Spike? Are you asleep?"

Spike made no move. He carefully controlled his breathing to a repetitive, deep, slow rhythm. He ignored the slight cramp in his leg that told him to roll over and alleviate the pressure, and he prayed his heart wasn't pounding loud enough for the other man to hear.

Finally, when Xander had assured himself that Spike was sound asleep, he made his move. He turned around and gently, as if he were rolling onto a surf board, he lowered himself into the soft double bed. Once he was stretched out, he sighed.

At that point, Spike threw his arm around Xander and he tugged to pull the taller man back and into a proper spoon. Xander's whole body went rigid in
humiliation at being caught. Immediately he began to struggle to get away.

"Shh. Please don't go, Xan. Stay. Stay and sleep with me."

While Xander did not answer, he did stop struggling. After a moment's hesitation, his body relaxed. His head settled onto his pillow and his butt was quickly cupped into Spike's lap. There was no conversation. None was needed. There was only a mutual understanding.

Spike grinned. Riley had been right when he told him to take a chance. Of course Spike would never admit that he had been talking to a dead man. People would think that Xander was the sane one and Spike was looney-tunes.

**Part Twenty-Six**

Xander awoke slowly. Because he was lying on his bad ear side, he could hear the birds singing outside the open window and the small, round alarm clock tick ticking away the passing seconds on the
bedside stand. He laid there, peaceful, somewhere between awake and asleep.

And he was comfortable. And he was comforted.

Since he had been caught the night before, there was no need for him to extricate himself from the plush, warm sea of blankets and pillows. He knew without looking that Spike was very close. He could both hear and feel the other man's breathing, and the heat that rolled off the small body was an odd combination of arousing and soothing.

Still, he was unsure what the morning would bring so he braced himself and he very slowly opened his eye. Spike smiled. "Good morning."

Xander forgot how to respond. His ability to verbalize melted away as he looked into the beautiful face that was now so incredibly near. It was exactly as he remembered. It was the same image that he had pictured in his mind a thousand times as he cwar-zone of the jungle. It was Spike.
Xander's eye glanced up to the top of his lover's head. It was nearly white blond from the summer sun and the tousled curls rested on the pillow, his forehead and one errant one wrapped itself scandalously around the shell of Spike's ear. Slowly, his line of sight lowered. The face was perfect. The small, straight nose, the sharp, pronounced cheek bones, right down to the soft pink downturned lips.

Spike was frowning. He was staring at Xander and frowning. Xander tipped his head just a fraction in question before realizing why. It was a stinging slap of reality that instantly brought him fully awake as his hand flew up to where his eye patch had gone askew. Just as quickly, Spike recognized his error and he grabbed Xander's wrist, holding his hand away. "No. Don't. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare. It's just that.... I don't know what I expected but, it isn't that bad. It looks so soft. Can I...please?"

Xander blinked and his heart pounded, a noise that competed with the constant, low, hollow sound ringing in his ear. They were in a temporary
standoff. Xander laid still while Spike held firmly to his wrist. He wanted to snatch his hand back and cover up. He wanted to say, "No. Don't touch me." But something else deep down inside him knew this was inevitable and it was almost a relief to get it over and done with. The chips had been dangling too long. It was time to let them fall.

"Yes."

Tentatively, ever mindful that he was treading on thin ice and ready at any moment to jump back to solid ground, he released his grip on Xander and Spike's fingertips slowly drifted toward the missing, scarred eye.

Xander whimpered. He wanted to run and hide. He fought the urge to scream out his terror and shame as he presented all his horror and repulsiveness for Spike to see. The grey, early morning light that filled the room offered him no shroud of concealment or protective camouflage. He was bare. He was naked in front of the most important person in his world and the fanciest patch ever made would not cover
what had already been revealed.

Xander stared into the deep blue eyes as he tried to gauge the level of disgust, but as always Spike was nearly impossible to read.

Very gently, as if he feared causing his lover pain, Spike's fingertips ghosted across the missing orb. It was sewn shut. He hadn't considered that when he tried to imagine it. The line of dark, nearly black eyelashes were still intact. They were full, lush and feathery as Spike's thumb brushed across them. The girls had always been envious of Xander's incredible lashes. It seemed almost cruel that they were left undamaged.

Spike's forefinger then moved up and outlined underneath the arch of Xander's eyebrow to feel the ridges of the scars. He lightly followed the pink, raised lines down to where they grazed the corner of the missing eye. Like tiny streams converging toward a giant river.

Spike's stomach lurched. Not in disgust at what he
saw but in shock as he tried to imagine what that moment of impact must have been like. What it must have felt like. His breath hitched as he fought to maintain a clinical detachment and not cry.

Then he looked directly into the eye that still saw. Xander was holding his breath. He was waiting for Spike to yea or nay their future, their love. He was waiting for Spike to sledgehammer the small lever that would shoot the disk up the gauge to measure his degree of aversion and loathing. It was a moment of hope and fear. It was make it or break it.

And then Spike smiled. "Geesh, Xan. It isn't near as bad as I expected. From the way you acted, I thought you were going to look like a fucking cyclops or something. Hell, I won't mind looking into that face when you're pounding me into the mattress."

All the air that Xander was holding in his lungs burst out in an odd sound that was a combination of a laugh, a shock and a tremendously relieved whine. Immediately his hand cupped Spike's cheek and he
searched the young man's face for any sign of insincerity or deceit. There was no trace of either. Only a shared end to the foreboding that precluded the truth finally being revealed.

"Really? Really, Spike? Cause I wouldn't blame you if...."

By now, Spike was actually laughing as he spoke.

"No. No, shit. Hell, it just looks like you're winking at me. Fuck, this can really work to my benefit. Now if I ask you if you want a load shot up your arse, you'll look like you're giving me the go ahead. Hell, I can ask you for any fucking thing and that wink will look like a big 'ole fuck yes!"

Xander was both outraged at Spike's lack of respect for the magnitude of this situation and he was delighted for the same. Immediately, Xander pounced and dug his fingers into Spike's ribs tickling him within an inch of his life as the patch fell forgotten on the floor.
Spike squirmed, laughed, squealed and tried his best to free himself from the onslaught by fingers that knew his most sensitive places and attacked each ticklish spot on his body. Xander hooted and good-naturedly scolded his victim for putting his carnal needs above Xander's facial shortcomings. In a very short time, all the physical contact took its toll and Spike threw his arms around Xander's neck as he pulled the bigger man to him and he dove in for a kiss.

Both their dicks were hard as a rock, and when they collided it sent a dual zing shooting through both nut sacks. Immediately their mouths opened and their tongues fought for ownership and position. All their squirming had them near the edge of the bed so, with a nudge and a push, Spike rolled over and settled on top. Without releasing the heated passionate kiss, Xander did the same and they rolled again tangling the covers around their legs and binding them together. All the movement also caused the headboard to
smack soundly against the wall.

"Oh dear God, please don't tell me they are...."

Jessica chuckled and swatted Tony's arm as they lay together in their own bed in the next room. "Shh! I certainly hope so."

Despite all his protests to the contrary, Tony grinned like a loon. He hoped so too, although unlike his wife, he did NOT want to hear about it. When the next slam hit, followed by a groan, he jumped from the bed and pulled on his pants.

"I just remembered. I was supposed to be at work early today. Don't worry about my breakfast, I'll grab some toast on my way out."

With that, he darted from the room and Jessica laid back with her head on Tony's pillow while the sounds of love from the next room floated through the house and filled her heart with joy. When the moans grew more frantic and were interspersed with desperate cries of profanity, her face warmed
in a shocked blush and she too scrambled from the bed and hurried down to the safety of her kitchen.

Spike broke the kiss and whispered harshly. His hands rubbed Xander's chest as his fingers caught in the coarse hair he had missed so much. Tugging the chest hair, Spike's thumbs brushed over the hard, pebbled nipples in the way Xander used to love. Apparently he still did. "Do me. You do me. God, I want to feel you inside me."

Xander was hard. Hard as a hammerhead and when his hand reached down between them, he was thrilled to find Spike similarly rigid and damp. Hearts and minds can tell gentle white lies. A stiff dick is all about the truth. Panting, Spike repeated, coaxing and urgent. "I'm ready. Do me."

Spike was on his back. His boxers had been tossed to the floor and his knees were pulled tight to his chest. He was magnificent. Xander tugged and stroked himself as he sat between Spike's widespread thighs and stared at the wonderful gift being presented. He wanted it. He wanted to shove
himself into the tight squeeze of that beautiful brown hole, but despite the lack of cranial blood, one last brain cell in his memory department refused to die.

"Um, no, I...there's no lube. I ain't got no rubbers. We...."

Spike threw his head back in frustration. He had no idea what the fuck was going on now, but he knew he needed sex and he needed it soon. So he tried again. "Suck me. Will you suck me?"

Xander licked his lips and groaned. "Yeah, roll over on your side."

Spike knew what that meant. He and Xander had spent numerous afternoons face to crotch as they slurped and sucked. Snuffled and smiled. Spit and swallowed. Immediately the mess of rumpled sheets and blankets took another hit as Xander scooted and rolled, accidentally kicking the wall as he went. Spike giggled and shushed him for fear the parents may hear.
Once they were in position, Spike looked into the arse then the dick of his partner and he again giggled and whispered. "Damn. You are just one winking eye no matter what the angle."

"Why you...!"

In retaliation, Xander swallowed Spike's fleshy rod to the root. "ACK!" Every muscle in Spike's body spasmed. Two years. Two years without a blow job. No man should have to suffer such a horrendous deprivation. "Fuck. Fuck. Bloody Fuck." Spike's arms fell to his sides as his legs flopped wide open.

Xander was so thrilled to give Spike such obvious pleasure that he made no insistence toward the oral copulation of his own member. Instead, his hand gripped and stripped his dribbley dick in rhythm to the bobs of his head. Up and down met back and forth. When his tongue stabbed the slit in Spike's cockhead, his own thumb swiped through the sticky cum that oozed out.
Spike cursed and mumbled. His head lolled back and forth as his arm flailed his hand in the direction of Xander's hold on himself. Spike wanted to do his part. He wanted to bring Xander pleasure and orgasmic bliss. But then Xander would suck his nuts or nip his glans and all coherent thought would fizzle out.

Xander didn't care. Oh, sure a good bj is always welcome, but knowing your lover still wants to fuck you? Priceless. So Xander gave it his all. His tongue snaked around Spike's shaft. He would pull back the foreskin and bathe the head in hot saliva before beginning another round of suck and lick. Suddenly, Xander felt his own orgasm zip lick an icy fire up his spine.

His mouth stopped working and he quickly threw his leg over Spike's prone body. In a concentrated effort, he took those last vital strokes that drew his sack up and caused his cock to stiffen even more. Then, with a jerk and a jolt, he unloaded. Hot, thick strings of cum shot downward and splattered onto Spike's chin and chest. Instinctively, Spike's mouth
opened and
his tongue stuck out in hopes of catching a steamy
white snowflake of semen.

When his own flow slowed, Miss Manners
whispered into Xander's ear and he returned to the
angry red flesh fiend who was still demanding
attention. Within seconds, it gave up the ectoplasm
as its owner arched upwards and shouted, "Bloody
fucking hell!!" and the assailant swallowed down
every drop.

Then, when it was all over and the room swam in a
funky-smelling fog and both men lay limply in a 69
position, all Xander could think was, 'apparently
Walt Disney was right. Fucking Wednesday really is
Anything Can Happen Day.'

Part Twenty-Seven
Xander sat naked on the side of his bed. His face threatened to split from the huge goofy grin that pulled his lips upward, reaching both his good and his unimportant missing eye. His body still hummed in euphoria from the orgasm and the revelation that Spike could still accept him and desire him. It wasn't about love. He didn't doubt Spike's love, but a love planted in pity had shallow roots. It could be watered and coaxed to grow but was eventually doomed to die.

A love that was fed and fueled with a hunger and a need for the physical pleasures of its partner was a real love. A healthy love. It would branch out, flourish and seek the sun. It would last and endure. Sex wasn't the only thing in their relationship, but without it they didn't stand a chance.

And apparently they had it. In spades.

Sitting here on the edge of his bed, Xander's feet swung happily off the floor. Spike had just headed down the hall, whistling and dancing a bare-footed square dance as he headed for his morning bath. He
had offered to share but Xander declined. He had other things on his mind this morning. Things that needed his attention quickly before Spike returned.

With a sigh that spoke of a reluctance to cover his happy manhood, Xander jumped up and tugged on his underwear. It was a jerky, sudden move that fucked with his equilibrium and his inner ear imbalance causing the bamboo flute in his head to whistle louder and send his discomfort towards the threshold of pain.

Xander winced and froze. He slowed his breathing and squeezed shut his eye. Gradually, the hurt and the hollow whistle receded back into its low, slow monotone. Xander didn't move. He waited to see if, like the waves of the ocean, the pain and sound would again rise, roll and crash against the shore of his brain.

When that didn't happen, Xander experimentally straightened up and he tentatively opened his eye. Okay. It was okay. He was okay. The din was again shifted into the background where it usually
resided. He then slowly pulled on some shorts and a tee before heading downstairs toward the kitchen where he could already hear plates and pans being shuffled around. It was a nice sound, and although it wasn't a sound in stereo, it sounded like home and family.

"Hi, Mom. Morning."

Jessica spun around. Her cheeks flushed warm and pink at the sight of her happy, sated son and the knowledge that he had just....

"Oh, hi honey. Sleep good?"

"Yeah, I really did."

Xander pulled out a chair at the small kitchen table and he plopped down. He watched his mother's gaze nervously avoid him as she beat the batter in her favorite blue bowl until it threatened to turn to froth. Subtly, his hand brushed over his patch to assure that it was still in place.
"What'cha makin'?"

Jessica stopped stirring and looked at the whipped batter in surprise as though she hadn't realized what a violent torture she was subjecting it to. She then chuckled and turned back to the stove and the large skillet with the blob of Crisco that began to melt as soon as she flipped on the heat.

"Pancakes. I thought you boys would like come pancakes. Will Spike be down soon?"

Xander clasped his hands on the table top. It was nice. Sitting here, alone with his mom while she fixed him breakfast. It was like a million mornings before. He glanced around. Same striped curtains. Apparently she still had a thing for chickens. Chicken salt and peppers. Chicken spoon holder decorated with peeps on the handle, and of course that same big ceramic rooster standing guard on the windowsill behind the sink. Same old, same old. Thank God.

"Yeah, go ahead and start them. He's in the tub, but
you know he doesn't take long."

Jessica nodded and poured two large circles into the hot griddle. Immediately the air was filled with the sizzle sounds and smells of comfort. June Cleaver and Aunt Bee had nothing on his mother.

"Say, Mom, can I ask you something?"

Jessica turned her head toward him and she was encouraged that he neither dropped his face nor covered himself with his hands. "Sure, sweetheart. You know you can ask me anything."

Xander nodded. "I need some money and I was wondering...."

"Oh, honey, of course." Immediately, Jessica rushed to grab her purse off the sweater hook that hung near the back door and she began rummaging as the flapjacks continued to cook unattended. "I think I may have five or six dollars but...."

"No, Mom. No. What I meant is.... Well, when I sent
home my pay, I know I told you to use whatever you needed, and really that's fine, I just wondered.... I mean...gosh, this is awkward but, am I broke?"

Jessica laughed and she sat down beside him. She placed her purse on the table and she withdrew a small, black booklet which she opened and handed over to him.

"Honey, money is a man's business. Don't ever be ashamed to know your financial worth. Every cent you earned, along with birthday and Christmas money from Gramma Ruth and Aunt Emma, went straight into your account. My name was on it along with yours only so that I could manage it until you returned. This is your money, Xanny."

Xander stared at the strange little book. It had page after page of numbers. Figures that filled the credit column and added up to be carried over to the next. The page his mother had turned to was the last entry and gave a final accumulative total.
"$14,851.98. Is this right? Is that a mistake? I have almost fifteen thousand dollars? How is that even possible?"

Jessica took the book from his hands and she ran her fingertip down through the dates of entry while she explained. "During your service you earned approximately four hundred dollars a month. It was a little less when you first started, then a bit more toward the end. You got a few hundred from gifts and the lump sum at the end is a military disability discharge amount. It accumulated a small bit of interest and, bingo, fourteen thousand, eight hundred and fifty-one dollars. Oh, and ninety-eight cents."

Xander was stunned. He had hoped for enough to pay a month or two of rent for Spike and maybe even for himself. He never dreamed he had this much. It was mind boggling. His mouth hung open as he stared at it while Jessica chuckled and returned to her neglected pancakes.

"Hey, smells like something is burning."
Xander jumped and the sound of Spike's voice snapped him out of his stupor. Quickly, he slipped the bank book shut and he stuffed it under his leg on the chair. Jessica noticed her son's act but gave no indication. Instead, she kissed her other boy on the cheek and offered an unrepentant apology.

"Sorry. Xan and I got to talking and I guess I forgot. No matter. Grab some coffee and have a seat. I'll start a couple more."

Spike could feel the glow of contentment. The tension and awkwardness between Jessica and her son seemed gone, and a relaxed ease reminiscent of the pre-war days was struggling to settle in. It felt good. It felt like a spring morning after a long, hard winter and Spike knew better than to jinx it by putting it into words. Instead, he took the stern approach as he mockingly scolded her for the state of his food.

"This is outrageous! I expect prompt service and exemplary food and you carelessly burn my
pancakes. I will never cater to this establishment again! Do not expect a sizeable tip, woman!"

Jessica spun around and leapt into an en garde pose with her spatula aimed and thrusted toward her opponent. She playfully bounced back and forth wildly, yelling "Hi ya!" and "Ho ha!" while Spike did his best to jump and remain just out of her reach. It was an effort made even more difficult by the rolling hilarious laughter interspersed with taunts of "Is that the best you can do?" and "Missed me again!"

Even Xander had tears running down his face as he hooted and laughed at the crazy sight of his mother and lover sparring at the stove. Finally, with a big-eyed recollection, Jessica stopped and spun around, mumbling curses as she hurried to flip the pancakes that were now close to joining their burnt predecessors in the garbage.

With victory on his side, Spike sat down at the table. "So, Xan, my man, what do you want to do this morning?"
Xander wiped the tears from his face and he sniffled as he continued to chuckle. "Um, well, if you think you can do without me, why don't you spend some time studying for your exams tomorrow. Mom asked me to go downtown with her for an errand. Do you mind?"

"Mind? I think it's wonderful! Maybe you can stop by the book store and buy Mom a cookbook."

Jessica barked out a "HEY!" before swatting him in the back of the head with a dishtowel.

Xander grinned. It felt good to be home.

Part Twenty-Eight

Xander had taken extra care after breakfast to spruce up his appearance. He combed his overly-
long hair and decided that while they were out, he would ask his mother if they could stop by Metzger's Barber Shop for a trim and a clip. He picked out an older plaid short-sleeved button-down shirt that had hung patiently in his closet for the past two years and he stepped into some worn, soft, baggy jeans.

Spike had spread his bookwork out on the desk and he tried not to watch or smile as his lover fussed around, dressing as though he were preparing for an important business meeting. He gave his opinion on current fashion trends when asked, and he tried not to chuckle when Xander wailed dramatically as his toe poked through the end of his sock.

Finally, he was done. He was dressed and had checked himself in the mirror a dozen times. He was nervous about venturing out into public and the reaction his deformities might cause. He had mental images of the movie, The Blob, when Steve McQueen runs into the theatre and a huge mob of screaming, flailing people flood out through the doors.
He didn't mind for himself. He could live life as a bell-tower hunchback, but he didn't want to shame his mother by putting her in an awkward situation.

"Well, I guess I'm ready to go."

Spike's nose had presumably been in his books as he had been scribbling notes on a sheet of paper, but in truth all of his attention had been on Xander. Gently, he laid down his pencil and he turned to the man who was standing just this side of the threshold. It broke Spike's heart. He wanted to tell Xander to forget it. To stay here in the safety of home where he was surrounded by a circle of love and family.

He considered offering to go along. But in the end, he knew that none of that was what Xander needed.

He needed to be a man.

"Okay. Well, take your time. You and Mom should
stop by the diner for lunch. It will be great. Just like old times."

Xander's face screwed up and he wore an expression that questioned Spike's sanity. He and his mother hadn't gone out for a rousing day of shopping since he had been ten years old. And even then there was nothing 'great' about it. So, with a slight shake of his head, he left the room.

Oblivious to Xander's reluctance, Jessica launched into the trip with an exuberance and exhilaration that she hadn't felt in a long time. If Xander had concerns about a lapse in their conversation, he needn't have. She was able to hold both sides with comments injected in between.

"All righty then. Are we ready to go? Well, of course we are. We are already halfway down the street, which reminds me, did you notice that the Billingslys have put new shutters on their house? I think they are fussy. What do you think? Oh, I know, you don't have to say it. You like them don't you? Do you? Do you really? I think they are fussy."
By the time Xander had the chance to respond, they were nearly a mile past the Billingsly house and the shutters in question. To comment now would seem totally out of context so Xander simply shrugged as his mother switched gears and kept on rolling.

"Now, don't take this wrong, honey."

Xander blinked. Any son with half a brain shudders when his mother begins a sentence with the dreaded words, "Your father and I have been talking" or "Now, don't take this wrong."

"Yes?"

"Well, as long as you asked. I thought maybe right after we went to our appointment at the bank, we could stop by the barber shop. I know the big fashion right now is long and shaggy hair for boys and lord knows I am hip and with it, however as ginchy as the shag is, I really think you might look better with a trim."
Xander turned fully in his seat in order to get a really good look at the alien who had inhabited his mother's body. He had never known her to try and be 'hip' or 'with it'. It was like seeing Ethel Merman dance the lead in the naked version of 'Hair.' It was just wrong on so many levels.

Calmly, he deadpanned. "I see. So while I'm getting the haircut are you popping over to the teen's department to try on miniskirts and bell-bottoms?"

Jessica shrieked and recklessly swatted her son on the arm. It was a momentary distraction that caused the car to drift left of center and straight toward a '59 Buick coming in the other direction. In response, the driver, an 80-year-old granny, flipped the finger, blasted the horn and swerved wildly into the gravel shoulder of the road as she shouted profanities.

With a laughing 'whoop' Jessica jerked the wheel back in line as Xander hung his head out the window and waved, shouting "Sorry" before collapsing back onto the passenger's seat and
joining his mother in a fit of hilarity.

Within minutes, as their laughter was melting to snickers, they pulled into the bank parking lot. Although a slight niggling of apprehension again filled the air, Xander found he was much less nervous than he had expected. His hand brushed over his patch and he climbed from the car.

Quietly, he followed her lead through the door and was grateful for the lack of interest the other customers in the lobby showed in the one-eyed man.

"Mrs. Harris, and is this little Alex? Well, look at you. All grown up. What a big boy."

Xander frowned and accepted the offered handshake from the man behind the desk. The small name placard read 'Ed Andrews' and the belly read 'FAT'. Big Ed, as he was known, was in Xander's estimation in no position to be labeling anyone as a 'big boy.' Hovering somewhere around the 400-pound mark, Big Ed had been the bank manager for
as long as Xander could remember. He had been the one who opened the short-term Christmas Club accounts that taught youngsters the thrill of saving and he had graciously handed out toasters for the new checking accounts. Big Ed WAS the First National Bank.

"Good morning, Mr. Andrews."

Big Ed was clearly intrigued and curious about the presence of the unusual eye accessory but was hesitant to ask. Pointing out a customer's deformity was generally bad for business. He had learned that the hard way when he had asked about old Mrs. Pinkton's bad hip when she refused to sit down, only to have her shriek at the top of her lungs that she was a victim of a horrendous case of hemorrhoids.

Now, he feigned ignorance. Easy enough. "So, what can I do for my two favorite customers?"

If Xander had two good eyes, he would have rolled them. As it was, he decided that getting this over as
quickly as possible was the best idea. "I have a savings account here, sir. It's money I sent home from the military."

Xander didn't comment when Big Ed's attention darted over to the eye patch and down again at the insinuation of the war. Instead, Xander chose to pretend he didn't notice and he continued in the execution of his business. "I would like to transfer half the money into a checking account. Also, I have some expenses I need to attend to today so I would like to withdraw some cash."

Big Ed seemed to give this request serious consideration as he frowned and lowered his sizable rump back down and into his reinforced chair.

"I see. Well, of course it is your money, but you need to be aware of how important saving your money is. I'm sure your mom here would want me to impress on you that frittering away your savings on things like skateboards or pretty girls.... Do you have a pretty little girl waiting for you?"
Big Ed leaned across the desk with a chummy smile and a wink that sent the creepy-crawlers up and down Xander's spine. In the old days, Xander would have retreated with his head down, his hands in his lap and a quiet acquiescence. That was the old days. This was the new.

Xander also leaned forward till their faces were startlingly close and he wore a grin of his own. When he spoke, his voice was low, firm and left no doubt that he meant business.

"Now see here you greedy bastard, that is my money. It is money I earned with two years of my life served in a shit hole so that fat pricks like you can sit here and demean and belittle people into letting you control what is theirs. It is none of your fucking business if I have a pretty girl, a handsome man or a whole herd of sheep waiting for me to fuck them. That is not your concern. The only thing you need to be concerned about is how fast you can get my accounts in order. And another thing, from now on you will call me Mr. Harris. Are we straight, Big Ed."
Big Ed was clearly rattled. He had read stories about war vets who came home twisted and frayed like a short fuse. They had what was called flashbacks and could snap at any minute. This one looked like he wasn't far from the edge.

He slowly leaned back in his chair and chuckled nervously as his eyes darted toward old Mr. Minks, the seventy-two-year-old security guard that was sitting and sleeping on a stool in the corner. "Well, of course, of course, Alex...Mr. Harris. I do believe we are more than straight. Now, if you will just take this form over to the teller, she will fill in the amounts you wish to transfer and withdraw and you will be on your way. Here are some temporary blank checks that you can use until your own arrive. Is there anything else I can help you with today?"

Xander accepted the small stack of checks calmly and he rose from his chair. "No, I think that will just about do it."

As he turned to go, Jessica jumped up to follow. Her
head was held high and her face beamed with pride. Her son did not need his mother to hold his hand. He was a man on his own two feet.

Then, as Xander stepped up to the teller's window to complete his transaction, Jessica spun around and marched back to where Big Ed sat, mopping his sweaty brow with his monogrammed handkerchief. Pointing her finger directly at him she announced, "And my son should get one of those new checking account toasters too!"

In less than thirty minutes they were back in the car and the shiny new toaster sat between them like a trophy.

"Woo hoo. I haven't seen Big Ed sweat like that since the Memorial Day parade when the bank's float lost its brakes and nearly ran over those two Girl Scouts. The fat bastard didn't know whether to see if the girls were all right or rescue all those fucking cookies that hit the pavement."

"MOM! Your language!"
Jessica laughed at the shocked look on her son's face then watched as the corners of his mouth twitched, wavered and finally broke into a grin as he began to laugh with her. When she was able to compose herself, she threw the gear-shifter into drive and stomped the gas.

"Next stop, the barbershop!"

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**Part Twenty-Nine**

"What time is it?"

Spike rolled over onto his side and reached down into the mess of wrinkled, rumpled blankets to fish for Xander's tired, limp dick. "I think it's time for one more round before I have to get up."

Xander groaned and hurriedly covered his genitals.
"Jesus, Spike. I have had more sex in the last twenty-four hours than my hand and I had in the whole two years I was gone. Give the poor thing a break before it falls off. Besides, it's Thursday. It's the day of your final exams. Get up. Go to school. Go. Go."

Spike flopped over on his back and he pouted. "It's only half past seven. I have a few minutes. Besides, we haven't actually had SEX yet. Oh, sure we sucked and jerked each other but you still haven't slid that wonderful, warm, hard...."

Spike leered and grinned as he quickly flipped back around and again began searching beneath the sheets, only to have his hand soundly smacked before it could locate the wonderfully warm pecker that was still defiantly soft and pliant.

"Now stop that, you evil sex fiend! I'll tell you what. If you get up and go take your bath now so that you can get an early start on your exams, I'll meet you late this afternoon over at your apartment. You still
have a few days before the rent runs out. We can have a pizza for supper. Is it a deal?"

Spike squiggled over to where Xander lay. He pressed their bodies snugly together and he softly kissed the upturned cupid's-bow lips. He ran his hand through the newly trimmed, soft brown hair and he glanced at the missing eye. It was so unimportant. So irrelevant in the big scheme of things. Suddenly the emotion of the moment overwhelmed him and his blue eyes swam with tears.

Immediately, Xander cupped the smaller face and he pulled back as he studied Spike with confusion and concern. "What? What's wrong?"

Spike closed the gap between them and he covered Xander's face with small, sweet kisses. Kisses that tickled his forehead, down his nose and ended up passionately sealing their mouths together before he threw himself into his lover's embrace. It was his habit now to make sure that when they hugged, Spike's lips were against Xander's good ear so that
any words of affection or arousal were not lost or missed.

"I'm sorry. I'm acting so girly. I'm just so glad you're home. I missed you so much. Oh God, Xander I didn't think it was possible to love you more than I did before you left, but I do. Thank you. Thank you for coming back to me."

Xander choked. He had no words. He wanted to be reassuring and promise Spike that he was strong, healthy and recovered, but that was a lie and right now there were enough ugly lies hidden between them. He knew all Spike wanted to hear was that everything was going to be all right, but Xander wasn't sure he would ever be all right again. Maybe the best he could offer was just his love. For now, that was all he had.

"I love you too, Spike. I love you too."

Then, as the moment dragged on, Xander became less cuddly and more uncomfortable. He could feel his skin growing too tight and the room shrinking
around him. The air slowed its circulation and it became hard to breathe. It was a twitchy feeling that grew into an all over skin-crawl that he recognized as the precursor to a full-blown claustrophobic panic attack.

Spike's embrace, nice as it was, was starting to strangle him while the soft blond hair that Xander loved to touch complicated and magnified the situation by covering his only functioning eye, effectively leaving him totally blind and, in his mind, helpless.

He wanted to shove Spike away but the guilt stopped him. His lover was oblivious to the adverse effects his extended clinging, cooing and extremely close contact were having on the soldier, and their relationship was still on such shaky ground that he feared another perceived rejection would ruin what few small steps forward they had taken.

So he swallowed around the huge lump in his throat and he tried to suffer through. Frantically he struggled to recall the words that the shrink had
told him to say. Something about 'I'm OK' or 'The war, for me, is over.' The stupid prick. Finally, a few saving words did pop into his mind that he knew would stop him from leaping from the bed screaming and diving back into his corner. Something that may prevent his heart and lungs from exploding within his body.

With a nervous laugh, he swatted Spike on the bare ass and he scooted back. Oxygen. Precious oxygen. 'Thank you Jesus.' Instantly a cool relief washed over him. "Okay, that's it. You're going to be late if you don't get your lazy butt out of this bed, and I don't want to be the cause of you failing a test because you missed the start. So, go!"

Spike's brow wrinkled slightly as he gazed into his lover's face. Xander was flushed and beads of perspiration dotted his forehead and upper lip. His only eye blinked rapidly and his pulse could be seen beating in his neck. Spike was concerned.

"Hey, you all right?"
Xander could feel himself slowly coming back down. He was better. He was getting better. Only one residual effect of the escalated anxiety remained.

"Yeah, yeah, it's just that damn flute sound in my head. It's louder now. It wants to aggravate me today. Don't worry about it. It'll go away."

"Are you sure? Do you want me to stay home with you and...."

"No. No, there is nothing you could do. It'll stop. It'll be fine. Go!"

Reluctantly, Spike climbed from the bed. He grabbed his things and headed for the bath. By the time he had returned, Xander was up, dressed and appeared somewhat better, so together they headed downstairs and into the kitchen for a hearty breakfast.

As Jessica shoveled eggs and potatoes onto her boys' plates, Xander went to the cupboard for a handful of aspirin. Spike watched but made no
comment. Instead, he turned his attention to the server and kept his tone light and cheerful. "So, Mom, what do you and Xan have planned today?"

Jessica giggled and winked conspiratorially at her son, who had now joined them and was shoving a potato around with his fork.

"Oh, we have plans, don't we Xanny?"

Xander looked up and appeared surprised to find himself sitting at the table. He forced a strained smile and did his best to respond to a question and conversation he had heard no part of.

"Sure. Yeah. Sounds good."

Jessica and Spike shared a fast glance that spoke volumes. It voiced concerns and it discussed conclusions. It offered a mother's reassurance and it conceded a lover's reluctant defeat. It promised that Xander would be cared for while Spike was gone and it left no room for argument. And it said it all in a blink. A meeting of maternal brown eyes to
loving baby blues that circumvented the one dark one that was still focused on the food he couldn't eat.

Within the hour, the Bayer aspirin had done its job. The whistling hadn't stopped but then it never did. The pain, however, was now beaten back to a tolerable level and Xander was starting to feel human again. He offered his lover encouragement and wished him luck before muscling him out the door. When Spike was gone, Jessica peered from the kitchen. "Is he gone?"

Xander smiled and she was relieved to see the lines of tension and the strain gone from his face. It was times like this, when she stood looking directly at him that she was startled by the change in him. Although he had put on a couple pounds, he was still stark and thin. His skin that had previously glowed bronze and tan from living in the sunlight was now pasty, ghostly white.

And he looked old. As if the life he had lived had taken an enormous toll on him. The last two years
had added at least ten to his appearance, and it broke her heart to think of the things he had seen and done to cause such a drastic change.

"He's gone. Did you get the cardboard boxes from Mason's grocery store last night?"

Jessica tossed the dishtowel over her shoulder and she hustled into the living room. His question had snapped her out of her fog and gotten her feet moving again. "I did. I had your dad stop by on his way home from work. He left them all out in the garage where Spike wouldn't see them. Why don't you run on up to your room and start getting your and Spike's things together and I'll grab the boxes and bring them right up."

Xander grinned and turned to go. When he reached the stairway, Jessica called to him. "Xan? I think it's wonderful that you paid the rent on Spike's apartment but you've only been home a few weeks. You know you don't have to move out if you aren't ready. You're always welcome here with your dad and me for a little longer. Spike too. It's only rent. It
will be there when you're ready and if...."

"No, Mom, I'm ready. At least I think I am. You and Dad have been great and I love you both, but I think I need to do this. If I can't.... If something...well, I know I can come back."

Jessica nodded and smiled. "Well, all right then. You scoot and start collecting your things. We don't have all day you know."

As it turned out, they hadn't needed all day. By the time Xander boxed up their toiletries from the bathroom and the few clothes and personal items from the bedroom, they were organized and packed in less than two hours. As a precaution against the threatened onslaught of another bamboo migraine, Xander slipped the last full bottle of whiskey beneath a stack of sheets, out of his mother's view, and he announced them done.

Together they took one long last look around the
stripped bedroom, and then without comment, they loaded the boxes in the car and drove away.

Part Thirty

"Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I know it's very early and I trust you have all had your morning cup of coffee to prevent your falling asleep at your desks."

The packed room replied with the expected and polite twitter of laughter at the weak attempt at humor by the professor. Spike didn't bother. He simply glanced over at the large round clock on the wall and hoped that this exam started and finished on time so that he could move on to the next one.

The morning was surprisingly cool for California in June, and he had enjoyed the drive across town with the woody's windows rolled down and the
breeze ruffling through his hair. His heart sang and his lips followed the tune. He felt great. It seemed as if he and Xander had turned a corner and maybe the worst was behind them.

Now, Spike wasn't a total fool and he wasn't blind, but he was an eternal optimist when it came to his love for Xander. He knew his companion was damaged far beyond the physical scars that showed on his face and body. He realized that Xander probably needed professional counseling and psychological therapy but they could do it together. They were really together and that's all that mattered. It gave him hope, but hope was an illusive butterfly that was sometimes hard to catch and harder yet to hold on to.

When he pulled into the college campus, Spike parked the woody in the furthest paved lot that was designated for the janitorial staff and dietary aides. He had a few extra minutes and he needed to mentally prepare himself for the grueling, unforgiving schedule they had given him. It had been his specific request that he complete all his
exams in one day and the Dean, as a special favor to Rupert Giles, had granted the younger Giles' request.

Spike now had to prove with his test scores that he was suitable appreciative of the opportunity afforded him. Because of that, and despite his being consumed with the situation he and Xander were embroiled in, Spike needed to let Xander go. At least for one day. He had to set aside all the concerns, care and love for the wounded man and focus only on the educational elements in his life.

And what better way to do that than with a long stroll down the paved walkways of the campus that he loved so much. The very air around him was steeped in learning and the exchange of fresh new ideas and concepts. It was waves and shouts from friends and acquaintances. It was the green smell of freshly mowed grass that tickled his nose and made his allergies sneeze. It was the ingrained knowledge that with the enlightenment he gained here, Spike could go out and rip the world a new asshole.
By the time he had arrived in his first classroom, the long walk and additional time had worked together to clear his mind and focus his attention. As much as he loved Xander, Spike had educational fish to fry and now he was ready to do that.

"...have at least three sharpened pencils at your disposal. If, in the middle of the examination, you have to come to me to request a writing utensil, I will consider you unprepared and deduct marks off your score."

Spike sat in a seat near the window. While the professor continued to drone through his opening remarks, Spike listened to the birds singing in the trees and the laughter of students lounging across the lawn. He never understood why his father chose a career that would keep him in school for his whole adult life and then he came here. Oh, yeah, he could do this.

"...and if I DO suspect any of you are holding a conversation, it will be assumed that you are cheating and your papers will be immediately

confiscated and your test scores nullified. In short, ladies and gentlemen, you will flunk. So, if there are no other questions, concerns or attempts to postpone the inevitable.... Turn over your exams and begin."

Those words were the starting gun Spike had been waiting on. His head dropped down, his brow wrinkled in concentration, the tip of his pink tongue poked out the corner of his mouth and he began to write.

~*~*~*~*~

"What do you think, honey?"

Xander pulled his head out of the closet where he was hanging Spike's shirts neatly on one side and his own on the other when he caught the tail end of her question shouted from the kitchen. Sticking his head out of the bedroom, Xander called back. "What? Sorry, I didn't hear you. What did you say?"
Mentally, Jessica scolded herself for her thoughtlessness. She dropped her cleaning rag and hustled down the hall where she stopped just a few feet from her son and she yelled, "I said, do you want the canned goods in the cupboard next to the stove?"

Xander flinched and slapped his hand over his good ear. "Damn, mom, quit yellin', you'll blow out the only ear I got left."

Immediately, Jessica began wringing her hands around her apron. Time with her son was such a wild pendulum swinging from happy and near normal to awkward and downright unpleasant. Xander frowned at her guilty expression. He could see her trying. In the old days, a comment like that would have earned him a parental smack on the back of the head. Now it caused a cracking of some of those eggshells they were walking on.

"Sorry, mom. Yeah, that would be great. Actually, Spike had some cookies in that one and I wanted to move them over."
Jessica nodded sagely as if they were strategizing world domination. "To the shelf nearest the sink?"

"Exactly! See, mom, we're still on the same wavelength."

Jessica chuckled and gave him a grateful wink. "That way your snacks can be close to your new toaster. The one Big Ed gave you for a housewarming gift."

Both mother and son roared with laughter at the shared joke and the eased tension before Jessica returned to her tasks in the kitchen and Xander put the finishing touches on the bedroom and bathroom. By the late morning, it was done. Every surface was clean, shiny and free of dust and clutter. Shoes, shirts and toothbrushes sat side by side and the entire apartment just screamed, 'US'.

After one last inspection, it was pronounced completed, and reluctantly Jessica knew it was time to go. She removed her apron and clutched it and
her purse close to her body as her son walked her to the door.

"I can't thank you enough for everything you've done, mom. I know I don't say it, but you and dad are the best and I love you both very much."

Jessica teared up as she threw an arm around her boy and kissed his cheek. "We love you too, Xanny, and your dad and I are so proud of you. Now, just because you're living here, we don't want you and Spike to be strangers. Come for dinner. Come for Saturday afternoons. You two can't roll around in bed together all the time."

"MOM!" Xander face turned beet red at the insinuation of his carnal activities and he knew it was time for her to go. Reaching around her, he jerked the door open and he shoo-shooed the laughing woman out and into the hallway before announcing, "I love you. Now go away before you embarrass me to death," and he closed the door as a smile played across his own lips.
And he was alone. In his own place. His grown-up place. It was astounding.

He walked from room to room in the very small apartment and he felt like a king surveying his castle. His life had taken leaps and bounds since coming home, and he was amazed to find himself here. He remembered back to his time in the military hospital when suicide was the only option he thought he had. He had confided that to his nurse, Peggy, and much to his annoyance she had laughed. "Life always has something new and unexpected waiting right around the corner for us. It's always too soon to give up."

Xander ran his hand across the squeaky clean kitchen counter and he had to admit that perhaps Peggy was right. His life was far from perfect but internally he could feel the scales beginning to tip in favor of good over bad, and wasn't that really the most anyone can hope for?

Then he had an idea.
He hurried over to the trash can and he retrieved the huge 'Welcome Home' banner that had been stuffed in there. He smoothed out the crinkles as best as he could and, using a black marker, he drew a dark line across his own name and he substituted Spike's. Using a roll of Scotch tape he found in a junk drawer, Xander hung the banner where Spike would see it as soon as he came home.

Home. What an incredible word.

Then he did what he had wanted to do all day. He got a plate of cookies, a glass of milk and he plopped down on the sofa while he waited for the television to warm up and come on.

"Nice place."

Xander glanced over toward the easy chair that was quickly becoming Riley's favorite spot.

"Haven't seen you in a while. I was beginning to think you were gone."
Riley snorted. "I've been around. Popped in a couple times but you and Blondie are always doing the nasty. Oh, wait a minute. No, you actually aren't are you? I mean jerking off is fine but Spike wants more doesn't he?"

"Shut up, Riley." Xander stuffed another cookie in his mouth. His tone, when he responded, had a low level of warning beneath it that he hoped would steer his friend's conversation in another direction. It didn't.

"You know, Xan, they have doctors you can go to. You could always do it behind Spike's back, but honesty really is the best policy."

By now, Xander was furious. He would have thought being dead would have taught a person a bit of diplomacy, but apparently not. On the television screen, Jack LaLanne petted his white German shepard as he expounded on the benefits of healthy living and strong muscle building exercise. If Riley hadn't been here to aggravate him, Xander might
have been tempted
to join Jack for a few push ups or toe touches.

"Now see here. My sex life is none of your fucking business! Why the fuck don't you go and haunt someone else? Someone who...."

Riley leaned forward and looked directly into Xander's eye. "How's your head feel, Xan?"

When Riley asked him that, it was as if time stopped ticking. The air in the room disappeared and all the colors around them seemed to fade to grey. The question suddenly put all Xander's attention and focus on the bamboo flute that relentlessly echoed through his brain. And it got louder. And louder. Louder than it had ever been as it hammered and vibrated against his useless eardrum. It felt like an ice-pick had been jammed into his one remaining eye.

Xander's body jerked forward. "AAHHH! Stop it! Make it stop!"
Xander clamped his hands over his ears as his body folded in on itself against the blaring noise and accompanying pain that split through his skull. With a squint, he pried his eye open slightly to look towards Riley with the intent to beg, but the specter was gone.

"Son of a fucking bitch!"

Xander got to his feet and he stumbled toward the bathroom. He swallowed a handful of Spike's Bayer aspirin and he did the only thing he knew to do. He felt his way blindly along the wall with his hands till he got to the bedroom. There, he located his bottle of whiskey and he began to drink.

**Part Thirty-One**

"Will! Will! Over here!"

Spike stopped in his tracks and turned in the direction of his name. When he recognized the caller, he threw his hand in the air and waved as he
waited to be joined.

For her age, Jenny Giles looked remarkably young. She wore denim capri pants, a sun-shirt, and her dark hair was tied up in a pony tail. She could almost have been mistaken for one of the students hurrying across the greens of the campus if it weren't for the baby she pushed in the stroller.

"Jenny! Hey little toad-girl. What are you two doing here on campus?"

Drusilla struggled to free herself from the secured straps that held her snugly in her Minnie Mouse stroller. Her fat little arms flailed and her stubby legs kicked to no avail as she called his name.

"Pike! Pike!"

Jenny laughed. "She misses you. Dru and I came to meet your dad for a dinner out. He had one last class and we decided to treat him to Chinese. Want to join us? We are even going to let him pay."
Spike laughed at the turn-about plans and he actually wished he could say yes. "No, Xan and I are having a pizza. In fact, I'm already running late and I still have to stop at Zifer's and pick it up."

Jenny leaned on the handlebars of the stroller and she studied her stepson's face as he moved around to face the toddler.

"How is it going with you and Xander? We haven't seen you in weeks and your dad and I have been worried."

Spike dropped into a crouch in front of his little sister and he ran his fingers through her thick, dark curls. Although his attention appeared to be on the child, Spike spoke to her mother's concerns.

"I know. I'm sorry. I meant to call but the days just kind of flow one into another. I've been really cramming for these exams today and haven't been thinking about much else. Thank God they're over. I just finished the last one."
"How do you think you did?"

Spike growled and grabbed Dru's toes, making her giggle and squirm.

"I think I did fairly well. Most of the subject matter was covered in the chapter reviews and my notes from the lectures were extensive. They'll mail the results in about a week but I'm not concerned. I think things with Xan are getting a lot better. We're talking and I believe his moods are leveling out. I'm hopeful, Jenny. I really am hopeful."

Jenny's smile was genuine but it couldn't cover the lines of concern that furrowed her brow. Gracefully, Spike stood back up as Dru renewed her protest against the unfair confinement, and he placed his hand over-top Jenny's. "Tell you what. How about if I ask Xan if we can come over to your place for one of your famous meatloaves? Maybe next week?"

Jenny nodded. She wanted to stay and talk but her daughter's restlessness was escalating and would soon explode in a screeching fit if the stroller didn't
move soon. Buying a few more moments, Jenny jiggled the walker back and forth while reluctant to part from her son. "Next week would be wonderful. Your dad will be delighted. I'll bake a pie and Dru will put a handprint in the top crust. Call us and tell us when. Okay?"

Spike pulled her into a hug and kissed her cheek. "I promise. I promise we will call in a day or so."

The ensuing trip across town was made with a cheerful heart. The engine of the trusty woody was chugging happily and, despite it being the evening rush hour, traffic was mercifully light. The late day sun dipped in the sky and left streaks of pink and gold streaking across the horizon. It carried the promise of a perfect California evening.

Without a real in-car radio, Spike had to entertain himself with a humming rendition of Elvis Presley's Hound Dog as his head bobbed in time to the tune and his fingers tapped on the steering wheel. The weight of the exams was off his back, the pizza was
resting on the seat beside him and he was on his way to the flat where Xander should be waiting in front of the telly. Spike felt good. Life felt right.

When he finally pulled into the drive at the rear of the complex, Spike grabbed the hot food box and he bolted up the stairs. He stuck his key in the lock and opened the door. "Xan? Hey, Lucy, I'm hooome."

The apartment was quiet. Too quiet. The sort of quiet that comes with a warning from the Surgeon General stamped on it. "This quiet may contain properties of an unhealthy nature. Proper precautions should be taken."

"Xan?"

Spike carefully laid his keys on the kitchen counter, gently so they wouldn't sound like wind chimes, and he scanned the area for predators. The late day sun was now so low in the sky that it was only moments away from bidding the world good-bye and leaving the moon to do its best. The limited light in the flat
was coming from the television screen. Shifting shades of grey and shadows as the characters in the sitcom mouthed their lines and skipped comically through their scenes.

The sound had been muted.

Every hair on Spike's body rose in foreboding and each of his senses went on full alert in an effort to discern or detect the danger. On the surface the apartment would appear to be uninhabited, but that was not what Spike's intuition told him. His fine-tuned Xan-dar whispered that the ex-soldier was here. Somewhere. In the dark. In the flat.

Spike considered slipping out the door, but knew that was not an option. If Xander was here, something must have happened to him and Spike needed to find him. Then a new theory came to mind. Perhaps Xander was just asleep. That was good. That was reasonable. He had simply gotten tired or bored and went to the bedroom to lie down.
Spike exhaled and attempted a grin. Sure, he thought, that was all it was. Still, despite his logical mind's attempts to interject some reason and calm into the situation, Spike's footfalls remained as soundless as possible. On the third step he cringed at the loud crackling sound beneath his shoe. He stopped and crouched to look down. It was the banner. Xander's Welcome Home banner. But now it had clearly lost its ability to welcome anyone home.

Spike picked up what was left of it and he turned it over in his hands. It was ripped, torn, shredded and stomped. It had his name written on it after which, the author apparently rescinded the hospitality.

"Uh oh."

Spike straightened back up. His heart was slamming against his chest and the bile rose towards his throat. It never occurred to him that whatever had happened had seen Xander as the victim. No, Spike would pity any cat burglar who slipped into this flat
in search of the family jewels. A run-in with the ex-Army, junkyard dog would be a rude awakening.

Quickly, before the fear in Spike's gut could overtake him, he moved towards the closed bedroom door. Then, remembering James Bond's comment about guns being shot through closed doors, Spike stood off to the side and he turned the knob. He pushed slightly with his fingertips and the door swung inward.

"Xan? You in here? You all right?"

Spike's voice was soft in case Xander was sleeping, and hesitant in case he was insane.

"Get the fuck out!"

Those four hateful, vile-spewed words were actually a great relief to Spike. The tone and inflection in which they were delivered told him all he needed to know. Xander was drunk. It was a conclusion and a beginning. It was bad, but not in the face of some of the other mental speculations Spike had been
mulling over. It just said that the pain or the sound or the depression had taken a bite out of him while Spike was away.

Spike moved slowly into the room, careful not to make any sudden gestures, and he sat on the edge of the bed facing the corner of the room where Xander sat. "What happened?"

"Where the fuck were you?"

"What? Xander, you know where I was. I told you. I was at the university taking my final exams. We talked about...."

"BULL SHIT!"

Spike watched as Xander cupped his head in his hands and rocked back and forth. There was something else going on. Xander knew where Spike was so there were other fish sizzling in this skillet.

"Xander. Look at me and tell me what this is all about."
Xander's hands dropped and his face snapped up. His expressing was pure fury and it flushed his cheeks a hot pink. He stared at Spike and he glared. His eye-patch lay on the floor beside him and, contrary to Spike's joking comments earlier, there was no humor or suggestiveness in Xander's forced wink.

"You want to know what this is all about, Spike? Good! It needs to be said! A relationship can't survive if one of the people in it is a lying, cheating, fucking dog that has been fucking around on the other one."

Spike was stunned. Of all the issues he would have expected, that was not one of them. It hurt. The accusation was unfair and unfounded and, beyond the insult, it pissed Spike off. This time when he answered, his tone was a matching color of red.

"Fucking around? You have been making general snide and snotty remarks ever since you got home. Insinuations that I was unfaithful while you were
gone. Is there something you want to ask me, Xander, because if there is, don't bother. I was NEVER unfaithful to you. The only sex I had in the two years you were gone was with my own hand and even then I thought only of you. I am NOT, as you so delicately put it, a lying, cheating, fucking dog!"

Xander shook his head slightly before dropping it and mumbling. Spike frowned and leaned closer. "What did you say?"

Xander again looked up and directly at his frustrated lover. This time he spoke clearly so as to leave no doubt.

"I said, I wasn't talking about you."

Part Thirty-Two
The words packed a hell of a wallop that nearly knocked the wind out of Spike. His heart sank to his stomach where it flip-flopped before threatening to regurgitate back into his chest. Silently, the moment stretched on as the two men stared at each other in a standoff that neither knew how to break.

A million thoughts raced through Spike's mind. This new Xander had an ability to say things, vile things that he knew could cut deeper than a razor. Could this be a lie? Could he just be tossing out words that he knew would hurt Spike more than any other? No, the expression of anguish, shame and defiance on Xander's face told the story. It was true. Xander had been unfaithful.

"You fell in love with someone else?"

Xander threw his hands in the air and heaved out an exaggerated sigh that said he thought Spike was the most ignorant man on the face of the earth. "Love? Fuck no. Hell, I don't know. You're missing the point here, Spike. I was unfaithful. While you were sitting home spanking your own monkey, I was sleeping
with another guy."

For Spike that should have been it. The final straw. The snapped backbone of the camel. It should have been his get-out-of-jail-free card that gave him a pass to turn and walk away from this whole monstrous situation. And that's exactly what he intended to do. After. After he got an explanation. After he got the fine-point details that would torture his brain every time he closed his eyes. Didn't he deserve that much?

"Who? Who was it?"

"Why? Why does it matter?"

"Because I want to know. Was it another soldier in your platoon?"

Xander actually looked shocked. Was Spike really that stupid? Did he not have a fucking clue?

"No. No one but Riley knew I was a homo. Do you know what soldiers do to fags in their platoons?"
They beat the fuck out of them. Or worse. The jungle is a great place to dump a body, Spike. Maybe that's what I should have...."

Spike was not about to have this conversation sidetracked by conveniently distracting talk of friendly fire.

"Then who?"

Xander studied Spike's face. The smaller man was crushed. Beyond hurt, Xander could see that he had dealt their relationship the final death blow. Spike could work through a lot of things, but not this. Maybe he was right. Maybe all Xander could offer him now was the unvarnished truth to walk away with.

Xander nodded his head in understanding and agreement. He pulled his knees up to his chest, wrapped his arms around them and he began to talk. It was odd, now that he was getting it out the pain in his head receded and the low whistle of the bamboo flute grew distant and soft as though it
were the musical accompaniment to his tale of lust and woe.

"There was a boy in the nearby village. Short, slight, jet black hair and slanted eyes. He came onto the base to do menial jobs such as feeding the chickens some of the guys kept and scrubbing out the cast iron pots from the kitchen. At the end of the day the cook would fill a couple of buckets with garbage and leftover food. The boy said it was for his goats and pigs back in the village but we all suspected it fed his family."

As Xander spoke, the room faded away and Spike listened to the imagery and descriptions and began to feel as though he were there. In the jungle. In the war.

"I never paid much attention to him. He was small. I figured no more than fifteen or sixteen years old. One night, when he was finishing his work in the kitchen, he cut his hand on a carving knife. It wasn't deep but the sarge told me to take him to the infirmary to be patched up and bandaged, so I did."
And we started to talk. He said his name was Nguyen but all the soldiers called him Nickel. He spoke pretty good English. He was nice. Easygoing, and we had a nice visit. I was surprised to discover he was actually eighteen and had already served in his country's army. I didn't ask him why he wasn't still there. I just assumed he was a walk-away. It happened a lot. They would get discouraged or hungry and just walk away from their jungle posts. Sometimes their military went after them. Mostly not."

Spike sat, listening intently. His anger was still very much there, but now it was put on a back shelf as the story continued to unfold.

"After that, I got to where I looked forward to his arrival every night on base. Not for any sexual reason. I wasn't attracted to him particularly. He was just...nice. Normal. One night I noticed some bruises on his arm that looked like fingerprints and I asked him what happened. He said one of the soldiers did it when he fucked him. I was speechless. I asked him what the fuck he was talking
about. The strangest thing was that he was so matter-of-fact about it. He said some of the other G.I.s paid him to blow them or to let them fuck him."

Spike scooted around a bit on the bed. He then leaned over and rested his arms on his legs. "So you mean that some of the other men in your company were...?"

Xander shook his head vigorously. "No. Gender has nothing to do with a set of lips wrapped around your dick. If they wanted to fuck him, it was always in the dark. Bent over. From behind and up the ass. Nothing faggish there. Just a matter of convenience and opportunity. Cash for slash they called it."

Spike's heart twisted for a young boy he would never know. A young man with a hungry family to care for who was just trying to survive in a war-torn world of despair and deprivation. This time when he asked for clarification, Spike's voice was soft and hesitant. "And did you?"
"Did I what?"

"Pay him?"

Xander squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his fingertips against his temples as if in an attempt to block out the memories that were marching in combat boots through the jungle of his mind.

"Yeah. I paid him"

Spike nodded his head. Although that was exactly the answer he had expected, it was the one he dreaded the most. Nothing further was said for nearly two minutes and Spike was beginning to think that was the end. And then Xander picked up the story right where he had left off.

"It was a long time, maybe a month between the time he told me about it and the first time we.... It was late. He was done with the animals and I saw him walking toward the gate. I ran and caught up with him like I had done a dozen times before. Just to talk. Nothing else. I couldn't go to bed because I
had guard duty in a couple hours so I told him I would walk him home. The jungle seemed so dark that night. So quiet. I don't know what made me.... I asked him... I said.... Afterwards, I got sick and threw up."

A single tear rolled down Spike's cheek as he imagined the scene that now seemed to hold no relation to either of them. It was as if it had happened to someone else. Someone he didn't know but people he had an unexplained empathy for. "What did he do?"

Xander sighed. A deep mournful breath of sorrow and shame. "He laughed. He pulled up his pants, counted his money and rubbed my back. He said, 'It be okay, Joe. Next time it be better,' and then he disappeared into the jungle."

Spike made a small strangled sound that came from somewhere deep down in his soul. He didn't want to hear any more. Hadn't he suffered enough? Hadn't Xander plunged the knife deeply enough into Spike's heart? Apparently not. "Was it better the
Xander swiped his forearm under his nose to smear off the snot that had begun to flow in accompaniment to his tears. "Yeah, I guess it was. After the third, maybe the fourth time, I just gave myself over to it. When I did, things changed. It stopped being dirty, hurried trysts in the jungle and it became more like dating."

Just when Spike thought the pain couldn't be worse, this revelation was salt on the wounds.

"I would go to his hut in the village. His family knew and I suppose because of the money, they always welcomed me and left us alone. That's when the worst of it started. That's when I...."

Xander choked and stopped as Spike's brain spun. What the fuck could be worse. What in God's name was so bad that he couldn't admit it even after all his other confessions. Like the masochist that Spike had apparently become, he had to know. "What? What did you do that was so much worse?"
Xander whimpered. He covered his face with his hands and he rocked back and forth, mumbling through his fingers. Spike had to strain to hear.

"I paid him extra. I paid him to pretend he was you. I told him words to say and things to do. Ways to touch me and how I would touch him. Jesus, fucking, Christ. I paid him to be you!"

All the oxygen evaporated from the room and Spike's jaw dropped.

Part Thirty-Three

"Mail's here!"

Xander popped out of the bathroom, still fluffing his wet hair with a towel and dripping all over the kitchen floor.
"Did it come?"

Spike stood inside the doorway with a stack of envelopes in his hand as he casually breezed through them.

"Hmmm. Let's see. Electric bill. An advert for the new fried chicken place down on Third. Two flyers for the upcoming election. And. Oh wait, maybe this is it."

Xander snatched the envelope from his smart-assed lover's hand and he held it under his good eye. He was totally oblivious and uninterested in the fact that Spike was ogling his naked, skinny body. As he read the return address, his left hand pulled the towel from his head, swiped it under his arms and let it fall to the floor.

"Department of Veteran Affairs. Well, that seems appropriate."

Spike groaned at the crass pun and he grabbed the
letter back. He wasted no more time as he ripped it open and began to read. Xander waited, impatient and twitchy. "Well?"

Smugly, Spike refolded the letter and he tucked it back in its folder. Xander considered beating him to death if he didn't speak soon. Finally, Spike handed the envelope back and gave his summary of its contents. "The medical report says you're clean as a whistle. I told you so. If you had gotten any kind of diseases, you would have pissed fire and your dick would have fallen off. It's a fact. Besides, all of the tests they ran and the exams they gave you after the accident when you were in the hospital...."

"They wouldn't have tested for VD. I don't know, maybe they did. I just didn't care enough at the time to ask. Now, I needed to be sure. I couldn't risk, after everything else I did to you, I couldn't take the chance that...."

Spike balled the letter up in his fist and tossed it in the direction of the trash can. He then casually strolled over and very dramatically flipped the
deadbolt lock on the front door. "Well, now we know. You have no more reasons for selfishly keeping your wonderful pecker all to yourself."

Xander grinned almost shyly despite the fact that he was standing stark naked, damp and quickly getting an erection that said the wonderful pecker couldn't agree more. After securing the door, Spike peeled off his tee as he closed the gap between them. Xander remained rooted to the floor as he waited for the predator that was slinking toward him. With the first touch of the small, cool hands on his chest, a shudder ran through his body. Spike frowned in faux concern.

"Are you cold? Maybe we should go back into the bedroom and warm up. Wouldn't want you to catch your death."

Spike whispered his suggestion as he rested his forehead on Xander's left shoulder and his fingers lightly brushed over the hard pebbled nipples. Xander's arms swung loosely at his sides. His flesh tingled in anticipation at the early hints of foreplay,
while his brain gave one last reprimand before shutting down. *Spike hasn't done this in two years.* Go easy. Don't hurt him.

"Yeah, bed would be nice."

Spike's head turned to the side and his smiling lips planted a soft kiss on Xander's neck as their hands clasped and their fingers intertwined. Walking backwards toward the bedroom, Spike's blue eyes never left Xander's brown while he led the way. The bed was a mess, rumpled and unmade, and as Spike climbed in he kicked the blankets aside as he laid on his back and sacrificially presented himself to his lover. When Xander eased onto the mattress to join him, Spike suddenly rolled over. Xander grinned. It wasn't a rejection. It was a selfish need. It was what Xander remembered Spike used to beg for Xander to do.

Straddling the slim hips, Xander pressed a series of kisses between Spike's shoulder blades then slowly moved down toward the firm round globes of his ass, all the time tasting his flesh with his tongue and
inhaling the sweetness of his skin. When Xander reached the valley separating Spike's perfectly perky cheeks, he roughly pulled them apart and wedged his nose in to sniff and smell and nuzzle the blond's sweet love-hole.

Spike jerked and arched back like a Chinese contortionist as a string of profanities tumbled from his lips. "Oh, fuck. Fuck. Shit. Fuck." Xander interpreted that to mean "Yes, please" and he stuck his tongue out, its tip lightly touching the anus, tasting it, moistening it, loving it. Feeling the wrinkled ridges of the surrounding circle.

Spike quivered. The pillow he clutched beneath his head was quickly becoming overheated as he blew puffs of hot breath into it. His hard erection pressed into the mattress and begged for friction. His hot little hole told his dick to shut the fuck up. It was his turn for pleasure.

"Oh, fuck, yeah, Xander. Damn that's good. So fucking good."
"Jesus, baby you taste so sweet. I could just eat you up."

Xander then slid his tongue slowly away from this anus, along Spike's perineum until it reached the bottom of his ball sack. There he nibbled at the round fullness and gently sucked the pouch, one testicle at a time. Xander wanted his lover as relaxed and pliant as possible when he slid in.

Spike responded by lifting one leg to the side to open himself up even more as his hips humped and a low whine begged Xander to return to his rosebud snack. But by now, Xander was his own mass of quivering need. All the conscious barriers were gone and his cock finally had the go-ahead to find satisfaction in the hot, tight squeeze of Spike's ass.

Xander sat back on his knees between Spike's spread thighs. He pulled his lover open with one hand and he stuck his forefinger in his own mouth to wet it before wiping the saliva across the hole. When it was spit-wet and slick, Xander poked his finger in up to the knuckle and he wiggled it. Spike's
anus flexed and twitched in delight as the blond looked back over his shoulder and he chanted like a cheerleader whose quarterback was already in the end zone.

"I'm ready, Xan. Come on. Do it. Do it. Do it."

Xander nodded. God knew he was more than ready too. He popped out his finger and with one more wet lick across Spike's sphincter, Xander draped his thin body across Spike's back. Even light as he was, Spike moaned at the wonderful weight of the man pressing down on him. Confining him. Restraining him.

Raising up slightly, Xander gripped his own cock and lined it up as Spike humped back and swore a string of yeses, hurrys and oh-my-gods. The sound of his lover's need for him and the feel of the promise of tight things to come had Xander's cock harder than it had ever been. He just prayed he could get it in and enjoy at least a few good thrusts before it exploded.
Xander placed the tip of his penis against the saliva-wet rosebud. Immediately, Spike pushed his bowels downward, opening his back door and Xander's cockhead slipped right in. Spike's anal ring locked around the fleshy head and both men stopped moving. Xander wanted to wait. To let Spike adjust. Spike wanted fucked and when he unexpectedly slammed his hips backward, Xander plunged the full length of his cock inside.

"GOD DAMN! FUCK!"

Xander's forehead dropped to Spike's back as the internal muscles squeezed and rippled around his hot rod while beneath him, Spike just moaned. The splitting full burn of finally being taken again was better than he had remembered. He was owned. He was possessed. He was complete. It hurt like fuck and he was in heaven.

"Move, Xan, move."

So he did. He pulled back, dragging his skin through the vise and raking what seem like a million raw
nerve endings through the hot love tunnel before he rammed forcibly back in. Then he did it again. And again. Each time faster and deeper as, together, they joined in a chorus of 'Ohhhh' and 'Ahhhh' as musical accompaniment to the sound of wet balls slapping against ass cheeks. Xander plunged and rammed with a hot intensity, slamming against Spike's prostate with enough regularity to have the bottom man whining and whimpering with need.

God did this feel good! Sweet Jesus it was good!

They couldn't think. They forgot their own language. All they could do was feel the shocking pleasure and pain as Xander fucked with total abandon. He was sprawled awkwardly on top as his hips bucked back and forth and his thick, heavy meat ravished the tender asshole.

Spike squirmed all over, matching Xander's moves by pushing his ass against the stiff, swollen member, all the time trying desperately to wedge his fingers underneath himself to find his own
needy dick.

"Xan, wait...I need...I can't reach...."

Without slowing his frantic pace Xander slightly shifted his weight, allowing Spike access to his dribbling erection. Immediately, he wrapped his fist around the slippery, sticky dick and he began to stroke himself as his lover continued to use and plunder his bowels.

Suddenly, Xander stopped and he pulled out. Spike protested vehemently. "No! Wha...? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing. Roll over. I want to see your face."

Spike groaned at the heated words and he flopped himself onto his back. Immediately, he drew his knees to his chest and he waited as one more thick, white drop oozed from the head of his cock. His hole was still stretched, still gaping open from the fuck and Xander slid effortlessly back in.
Spike's eyes rolled back and he sighed, "Oh, yeah."

Now staring into the baby-face of his lover, Xander began a slower, smoother rhythm. He gripped the backs of Spike's thighs and he dug his fingers in as he rocked back and forth. Almost mindlessly, Spike fisted himself in time to Xander's thrusts and together they relaxed into the moment.

But it wasn't to last. Watching Xander's scrunched up face as he fucked his asshole was too erotic and Spike could already feel the lightning snap around the room and settle in his bowed spine. His cock grew impossibly hard as the foreskin stretched back and his nuts pulled toward his body. When he whimpered and the speed of his hand picked up, Xander knew his lover was close. In fact, so was he. He had held his own orgasm off for so long that he knew when it finally hit, the intensity would hurt like hell. He couldn't wait.

Xander quit playing and he went about the business of coming, and coming hard. He was focused. He
was fervent. He wanted to see Spike's face when he erupted and pumped hot sperm into his rectum. He wanted to see the blond when his body bucked and jerked as his own orgasm released his load, shooting over his hand and pooling between their bodies.

And he wasn't disappointed as, less than a minute later, Spike's face contorted, his neck muscles corded and he shouted out his powerful orgasm.

"Holy mother of GOD! FUCK! YESSSS!"

Spike's unrestrained pleasure was Xander's trigger. His vision went white and the static hummed in his ears. His arms buckled and his body shook with the freight train power of his ejaculation. He came with a roar and his body shuddered with the release that pulsed through him, pumping out and overflowing his partner's bowels.

Neither man moved as their bodies rode the wild waves of their own release. They swam in the warm rush of euphoria and finally coasted to the shore on
a backwash of foam and froth. When coherent thought returned, Xander carefully pulled out and he flopped onto the bed next to his lover. Then, recalling a conversation of nearly three years ago, Xander grinned and chuckled.

"Wow."

Spike remembered and he knew his line perfectly.

"Hell yeah. We're gonna do a lot of that."

Thrilled that Spike remembered, Xander leaned over and kissed his soft mouth.

"OK."

Part Thirty-Four
Xander yawned and stretched his arms high over his head. He blinked and paused as the gears in his brain engaged and he realized he must have dozed off. Slowly, he opened his eye wide and he glanced around the room. It was dim due to the closed curtains but the light that framed them told him it was still early in the day.

When he filled his lungs with oxygen, his nose wrinkled and twitched. The room stank. It was fogged with a heavy, funky, sour smell that snickered with implication and Xander grinned. They had made love. They had sealed their promise of...oh, hell, they had butt-fucked like rabid weasels.

And it was magnificent!!!

His dick was still sore from the tight tunnel of love and his nuts felt as if the sperm had been wrung from them like a dishrag. He hadn't had sex that intense since.... *No*. He checked himself. *Don't go there.*
He turned his head to the right where his lover lay beside him. Sleeping on his deaf-ear side, Xander couldn't hear the soft, sweet snuffles and snores as Spike's chest rose and fell with deep breaths of slumber. But it didn't matter. Some things that were heard with the heart didn't need the ear's confirmation.

The only other sound in the room was the muffled tick, tick, tick of the small, round, wind-up alarm clock beside their bed. All else was silence. Sweet silence. The merciful silence of a flute that had finally run out of air.

It had stopped. It had crested with the weight of the guilt. It hammered through the confessions until its echo had been overshadowed by the shouts and sobs. Then, as though it had saddled and ridden on the back of the anger, it had softly faded away as the arms of love and the words of forgiveness stole away its power.

Finally, it had ceased. Stripped of its dominance, it slipped away in the exoneration of recriminations.
For the first few days, he had expected it to return at any time with an "AHA! Gotcha!" But it didn't. Not during their long, honest talks. Not while they cuddled, kissed or even in the afterglow of shared orgasms. When Spike took him to the VA doctor for a checkup and a requested blood test, Xander didn't even mention it for fear he may jinx his luck.

Finally he had to accept that the flute had been laid down.

Xander rested on his side, content to just watch Spike sleep. He had no urgencies. No place he had to be.

"Psst Psst."

Xander frowned and flipped over on his other side at the odd sound. When he looked, he was delighted to see his best friend standing, framed by the bedroom doorway. Riley held his finger to his lips miming a silent 'shhh.' He then waved his hand in a motion of "come on" before he turned and
disappeared out of sight.

Xander quickly looked back to make sure that Spike was still sound asleep and was unaware of their strange company. He was, and Xander quietly slipped out of bed. He grabbed his boxers off the floor and he padded noiselessly out of the room toward the direction Riley had gone. Stumbling into first one leg of his boxers then the other as he went, Xander rounded the corner and saw his buddy leaning against the kitchen counter.

"Well, well, well. Look at you. You're looking good, Xan. Seems like you and Blondie are working things out."

Xander blushed and wondered just how much Riley had seen. From the smirk on his insufferable face, Xander assumed plenty. Reaching around his ghostly friend, Xander picked up the tea kettle and took it to the spigot to fill it with water, knowing Spike would want a cup of tea when he got up.

"Yeah. Things are better. That was dirty pool
though, Ri. Kicking in my migraine like that. It hurt like hell and I got drunk as a skunk. I oughta kick your ass."

Riley just laughed and shrugged. "Yeah, sorry about that but it was beginning to look as if you were never going to come clean and let's face it, Spike deserved to know the truth. So, everything is all right now?"

Xander set the kettle on the stove and turned on the burner as he mulled over his answer. "It's better. I know I'm still fucked up and we have a long way to go. We have good days and on bad days we can fight like two hungry grizzlies with one tuna fish between them. It's hard, Ri. Sometimes just living is hard but I guess each day that I know he loves me, it gets just a tiny bit easier."

Riley chuckled. "Hell, that's got nothin' to do with the war, Xan. That's just livin' life as a grownup. It's the great times that give you the strength for the bad, and each bad one makes you appreciate the great. It's a circle. It's the circle of life."
Xander crossed his arms over his chest and he rested his butt back against the warming stove. He used the time to really study his friend. He looked so normal. So untouched by the war that had destroyed him. He seemed so alive. He also looked like a man with something on his mind.

"Why do I get the impression that you're here for some other reason besides imparting the wisdom of the great philosophers on me. And don't tell me it's because you're still fascinated by the salacious details of my sex life."

Riley waggled his eyebrows and pinched the corners of his imaginary handlebar moustache as he leered. When he got the expected look of disgust from Xander, all the humor seemed to melt away and suddenly the ever-cheerful Riley was very serious. "I'm here to say good-bye, buddy. Seems like it's time for me to go."

Xander's body went rigid as he stood upright then jumped, startled as the tea kettle behind him let out
a blasting whistle. Quickly, he flipped off the heat before turning back to his friend. "No. Why? You can't go. I need you here."

Xander extended his hand then checked himself and withdrew it, knowing instinctively that touching would be against the rules of spectral visitation. Instead, he would try reasoning. Dead or alive, Riley had always been a man who could be swayed by a persuasive argument.

"You did come here to help me, didn't you? Isn't that why you're here? Well, I still need help. I'm a fucked up basket case, Ri. You know that. Tell you what. One year. You stay with me for one full year and I'll...."

Riley shook his head. He had clearly already made up his mind. "No can do, Xano. I only popped in to see that you got your feet on solid ground and that you and Blondie found your way out of the jungle together. Now that that's done, I have bigger and better places to be. Can't spend eternity in a three room apartment in Sunnydale."
Suddenly, Xander was overwhelmed. It was nearly as painful as the first time he had lost him, and the fear of the sorrow and the suffering again threatened to swamp him. "Then take me with you. I don't care about living and dying. Let me go with you."

Riley's image was already starting to fade and when Xander could see the toaster sitting on the counter behind him, he knew their time was short.

No doubt as a last minute irritant to Xander, Riley reached inside the waist band of his shorts and scratched himself one last time. "We'll see each other again but you got a long time to go before then. You and Blondie got a lot of hills to climb and valleys to cross. Do me a favor, Xan. Go to the ocean on a sunny day. Ride one more wave and think of me. Promise?"

Xander lunged forward with his hand reaching out but before he could promise, Riley was gone.
For a long time he wasn't sure what to do. He stood glued to the spot where his friend had been, and even the air around him felt cold and empty as he waited for the crushing grief to engulf and enshroud him. When it didn't come, he was more confused than relieved. His only thought then was of Spike, and he turned to go back to bed.

Tiptoeing quietly so not to awaken him, Xander was surprised to find Spike, wide awake, out of bed and down on his hands and knees rummaging wildly through the bottom of the closet.

"What the hell are you doing?"

A fleeting expression of embarrassment passed over his Spike's face at being caught and he sat back on his heels.

"All right, I know this is going to sound crazy and you'll probably call the men in the white suits but here it is. I have been...seeing?...dreaming? Let's just say 'visiting' with Riley. Yeah, I know how crazy that sounds. But anyway, he spoke to me just now."
Said he was going away but he left us something. Said we would find it in your old Army duffle bag."

Xander hurried over and knelt down beside his naked lover. He made no accusations of insanity or assumptions about mental illness. In fact it seemed logical that Riley would also pop in on Spike. "But the bag is empty. We took everything out of it and tossed it in the back corner."

At the indication of the bag's location, Spike dove in and crawled around. After rooting through and tossing shoes, slippers and a bowling ball bag out of the way, he emerged with a triumphant "AHA!"

Quickly, with fumbling fingers, Spike jerked it open and they both peered inside. Nothing. The bag was empty. It was a disappointment, although neither had any real reason to expect a different outcome. Illusions rarely leave gifts with bows and ribbons unless their last name is Claus. Spike sighed and he handed the bag to Xander.

Xander shook his head and smiled. "It doesn't
matter. It's only...."

But when he tossed it back into the closet, his good ear picked up the faint tinkling sound of metal. Again he snatched it back and Spike's eyes grew big. When Xander shook the bag again they both heard the rattle. Shoving his hand in, Xander felt around till he found a torn section of lining and he wiggled his fingers inside. Feeling around, his fingertip brushed cold metal which he grabbed and jerked out. Both men stared disbelievingly at what lay in Xander's hand.

Finally, Spike had to say it. "His dog tags. It's Riley's dog tags, but that's impossible. The casket was closed because of his injuries, but they assured his parents that the tags were on him when he was buried. How can this be, and if I only dreamed it was Riley, how did I know...?"

Xander laughed and scooped Spike up in his arms as the tags dangled between his fingers. "It's a gift, Spike. He's telling us to always remember the circle of life. To rest in the valleys and not be afraid to
climb the hills. To be grateful for love. To appreciate the people we love and the people who love us. And maybe it's about leaving the world a little better than we found it. And if we do all that our lives will be strong, long and happy. I saved your life once, Spike, and now you saved mine. I think that binds us to walk through this life together. What do you think?"

Spike threw himself into Xander's arms and together they tumbled onto the floor, laughing and kissing and Xander had his answer.

Part Thirty-Five

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE. IT IS MY GREAT HONOR TO WELCOME YOU TO THE BROWN BODIES SURFING COMPETITION OF 1971."
The response from the crowd to the loud speaker announcement was wild, unbridled enthusiasm as the cheering roar and applause rose to a crescendo then fell again to allow the speaker to continue.

"THANK YOU. THANK YOU. NOW NOT ONLY WILL WE BE CROWNING A NEW SURFING CHAMPION TODAY, BUT WE ARE THRILLED TO ANNOUNCE THAT WE HAVE SEVERAL PAST CHAMPIONS HERE FOR THE MEET AND GREET, AND I'LL BET IF YOU ASK THEM VERY NICELY, THEY MAY SIGN AN AUTOGRAPH OR TWO."

An excited, nervous buzz traveled through the mob of surfing aficionados as heads snapped and turned in all directions, hoping to catch a glimpse of some of the men who had graced the posters that hung on their walls.

Xander's vendor's tent was set up at the end of a long row of displayers. As a past champion and a successful businessman, he had been given a choice spot on the sandy beach. It was the location all the other vendors would have died for but no one
questioned his right to. Not only was his the tent that attracted the largest crowd, but he had secured his position by donating one of his prized, world-class, handmade surfboards as a top prize to be claimed by the newly crowned champ.

He had arrived early in the morning to supervise the setup and now stood at the side of his tent, arms crossed over his chest and seemingly oblivious to the frantic activity going on behind him. His display booth was packed and his employees, Penn and Andrew Wells, were having a hard time keeping up with the orders for boards as well as selling t-shirts, hats and trinkets all with the famous H&F logo.

Xander stood nearby. He was unconcerned with the business of business and he was seemingly unaware of the furor his presence stirred at the annual competition. Tall, tan, muscular and handsome, his appearance stirred whispers and appreciative stares from everyone on the beach, whether they knew his name or not. Gossip and conjecture regarding his missing eye had been an ongoing subject of yearly discussion. The common conclusion was that
a shark attack or an accident that drove his board onto the rocky coastline of an exotic island had been the cause. Whatever the circumstances, it only served to make him more appealing.

Teen boys who were themselves aspiring surfers admired his sample boards, even knowing they were out of reach financially. They ran their hands reverently over the smooth surfaces that were polished to a glasslike sheen and painted in exotic, one-of-a-kind patterns with the coveted, H&F emblem emblazoned across the bottom. Any surfer riding a Harris & Finn board garnered respect simply by the wood they rode, regardless of their skill.

Young girls flitted past in droves. Drawn to the herds of teen boys and excited activity, they would clump together in groups that reminded Xander of Willow, Buffy and Cordelia. Squealing groups. Breathless, whispering groups that would hold hands to offer each other support before conjuring up enough courage to casually stroll past the handsome, famous and darkly mysterious surfing king, Xander Harris.
Xander thought the whole situation absurd and amusing. He would stand, assuming the pose of a cigar store Indian, arms crossed and uninterested until they were directly in front of him. He would then smile, nod and greet them with a single word. "Girls." The result was always the same. An ear piercing scream as they swooned, stumbled and hurried away to giggle and plan their next pass.

"...IN JUST A FEW MOMENTS WE WILL BE CALLING ALL OF OUR SURFERS TO THE FIRST RUN OF THE DAY. THIS WILL BE THE INITIAL ELIMINATION ROUND THAT WILL...."

Xander squinted against the glare of the sun. He stared off into the direction of the parking lot and wondered impatiently where the hell his lover was this time.

"Mr. Harris? Hi. My name's Tina. Would you autograph my H&F t-shirt?"

Xander's attention turned to the voice that
mumbled incoherently to him from his deaf side. When he looked, he found himself face to very close face with a bleached blond wearing a newly purchased Harris & Finn tee. She had bought a small when she needed a large. He didn't ask her to repeat herself as it was obvious what she wanted.

Her ample chest was poked out as she stood in a sway-backed pose. She held a black, permanent marker that she extended and offered with a wink. Xander snorted. Who would ever have imagined that an eyepatch would be perceived as a sexually suggestive accessory.

"Sure. Of course."

Xander accepted the marking pen and then before she could protest, he spun her around and signed his scrawl across the back of the shirt. When he finished, she turned back with a full-lipped pout.

"No, I wanted you to...."

"Whew! Damn, sorry I'm late. I swear to God! Those
women!!"

Xander's professional demeanor evaporated with the arrival of his boyfriend, and the presence of Tina and her twins was immediately dismissed and forgotten. Unfortunately, something else was also overlooked. Tina reached out. "Um, Mr. Harris? Xander? You still have my marker. Um, can I just.... Oh, fuck it."

Xander and Spike drifted off to a more private spot on the beach as Tina stomped away.

"So what the hell happened this time? The competition has already started."

Spike threw his arms in the air in pure frustrated exasperation.

"Are you fucking kidding me? First, Willow and that damn demon-spawn child of hers, Woofy, couldn't find their flip flops. Turns out he buried them in their backyard. Then she couldn't find the sunscreen. It took an hour of coaxing before Woofy
admitted he squirted it all into the toilet cause it looked neat when it flushed away. I'm telling you, Xan, Wolfbane Rosenberg is the anti-Christ!"

Xander threw his head back and laughed at his partner's near nervous breakdown. "Shame on you. He's just a little boy. So where did you leave them?"

Spike stood slightly behind Xander's much larger body as if using it as a protective shield and he pointed off toward the area of the picnic pavilions where the four-year-old boy with red hair, green eyes and a devil's smirk was no doubt wreaking havoc.

"There. I dumped them over there. Da and Jenny are already setting up the tables. They brought Tara, and little Summer is playing with Dru. If the sky turns orange, you'll know Woofy has set the picnic shelters on fire."

Xander put his hands on his hips and snorted at the exaggeration. "Spike. Come on now. Isn't that a little...you did secure the charcoal lighter fluid didn't
Spike nodded. "Yeah. Da has it under lock and key. Oh, interesting tidbit. Willow said she got a letter from Oz. Seems after the Canadian government established that they were not as liberal as Oz thought and he slipped away, leaving the girls on their own, he did get out of the country after all."

Xander's eyebrows rose sharply. After the disbanding of the commune, Oz had just seemed to disappear. To be honest, Xander had hoped, with crossed fingers, that he was serving time in a gulag somewhere for his illegal pharmacutical activities as well as the abandonment of his two families. "I know I'll kick myself for asking, but where did the little fuck surface?"

Spike shook his head at the unfairness of the world. "He popped up working on a fishing excursion boat in the Caribbean. To be honest, I think the tuna are a side business. I think he's dealing in Columbian gold and apparently making good money."
Xander's face screwed up in disgust. "So, if he's rolling in chum, fish bait and weed, did he send some child support for Wolfbane and Summerfall?"

Spike rolled his eyes. "Actually he asked Willow if she could front him a few bucks in a money order. I think she and Tara were going to sell some of their food stamps to raise the money. Maybe we could...."

"NO! I will do anything I can to help them while they get on their feet, but I will not send that draft-dodging, irresponsible baby-maker one red cent!"

Spike nodded his agreement. He didn't want to think of anything negative on such a beautiful day. The only thing that would make it perfect was if Buffy and Cordy were here but with Buffy due to deliver twins any day now and Cordy taping a TV pilot they had both promised to make it next fourth of July.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. LET'S CONGRATULATE THE TEAMS WHO HAVE MADE THE FIRST CUT, AND"
A ROUND OF APPLAUSE FOR THOSE WHO UNFORTUNATELY DID NOT. WE ARE GOING TO TAKE A BREAK BEFORE MOVING ON TO THE NEXT ROUND, AND WE ENCOURAGE YOU TO VISIT OUR VENDORS AND...."

The announcements brought Spike and Xander back to the present and dismissed the unpleasant topic of their previous conversation. Spike glanced around and grinned at the hustle and bustle of people who shoved and milled around Xander's display.

"Jesus! You're going to be working night and day to fill all those orders. You're going to be a rich man, which in turn means that I am going to be a rich man since I do love to be taken care of."

Xander chuckled at the waggled eyebrows and the leering grin. They had come so far in the past three years. As promised, Xander and Spike went to the beach for one last ride in honor of Riley, but a strange thing had happened. Once he got on the board, his whole world turned. He found his footing
and his balance and he knew that somehow, his future and his fortune were still on the waves.

With a small business loan from VA services and Spike's degree and expertise in accounting, Xander launched a business that took the surfing world by storm. Some days Xander still struggled, but those were few and stretching far between.

Riley had been right. Xander had come full circle. The circle of life.

Brazenly, Xander took Spike by the hand and he leaned over so that their noses nearly touched and their eyes met.

"I'm already a rich man, Spike. I still have you."

The End