

Pairings: Spike & Xander (friendship)

Setting: *Season 2, starts the evening of Valentine's Day in the middle of Bewitched, Bothered & Bewildered, after Cordelia dumped Xander and Spike and Angelus gave their gifts to Drusilla.*

Rating: *PG-13*

Feedback: *Please, please, please*

Disclaimer: *Nothing belongs to me; all belongs to Joss and Mutant Enemy and anybody else who actually makes money off this stuff - certainly not me.*

Warnings: *In the L&L part, not much.*

Summary: *Spike and Xander discover that they have more in common than they thought.*

Listening and Lies

by

Daedreams

Part 1 - Prologue

"...Call Buffy - I'll be there as soon as I can!" Xander slammed the phone down and ran into the library cage. He flung open the doors of the metal weapons cabinet and grabbed a small battle axe and the crossbow and arrows. Taking a moment to load one arrow into the crossbow, he ran out of the library.

He was almost to the exit, when a noise near the student lounge stopped him. He looked to his left, up the staircase, and there was Angel, standing on the mezzanine landing of the stairs. The vampire was in full game face and looking up toward the top of the stairway and suddenly, there was Miss Calendar. She stumbled down the stairs quickly and screamed when she landed in Angel's arms.

"Sorry, Jenny. This is where you get off." Angel put a hand on her chin and one on the back of the teacher's head.

Now, now, now! Xander's brain was screaming at him. With shaking hands, he lifted the crossbow toward the two on the stairs. He aimed, and fired...

Part One

Five days earlier...

Xander Harris kept his hands buried deep in his pockets. He knew that walking around alone after dark was a special Hellmouthy Sunnydale no-no, but perhaps he had a little bit of a death wish this night. Valentine's Day. There's nothing like February 14th to get your heart stomped on. He should have known. *What was I thinking, trying to actually date Cordelia. It's not like nobody saw this coming. Buffy knew. Willow sure as hell knew. And he knew. Deep down.*

"Bitch!" he said to the night air, hoping to convince himself to hate her. But he didn't somehow. In the short time they spent together, Xander saw a side of Cordy that he was sure no one else knew about. Sometimes when they would go parking in her dad's car, they would get in the back and she would lean against his chest and stretch her legs out across the seat. He would wrap his arms around her and they would just sit like that. At times, this would get kinda boring, but most of the time,

he would just wonder what she was thinking about. She would get so calm. Every once in a while she would let a small sigh escape, and he would squeeze his arms around her just a little tighter. She would fall back into him a little more, making Xander feel more like a man than ever before - just knowing that he was there to protect his girl from whatever she may be fearing.

So, was he wrong? Was he wrong about seeing something special in her? It was obvious why she broke up with him. Her friends were giving her a hard time. He knew she was shallow when they started, but he thought that somehow she wouldn't be shallow about him. Not when it all came out in the open. One mistake of many, it seems.

Xander shook himself out of a daze and found he had wandered into a cemetery.

Oh, primo move, genius. He reached into the inside breast pocket of his jacket and took out a small wooden cross he had stashed there. Since Buffy came to town, he knew not to go anywhere without a cross. It suddenly occurred to him that he didn't know which cemetery he was in. Once you were in the center of them, they were pretty hard to tell apart. They all had the same grass and

trees and tombstones and crypts. *How the hell did I get lost in my own dumb town? Next time - breadcrumbs.*

He knew he was walking west when he came out of the Bronze, so he continued to do so. His house was this direction, anyway. After he had walked a couple minutes, he heard a low voice mumbling something he couldn't make out. He stopped to listen for which direction it was coming from (point being to walk *away* from the disturbing mumbling voice). Sounding like it was to his right, he started walking straight again, until he heard a loud clank and painful wail. His protection instinct took over and he ran to find out who needed help.

Xander was stunned by the display he saw in front of him.

It was Spike. There was no second guessing that. Even in the dark, the platinum blonde hair was pretty easy to spot. The vampire was by himself and on the ground. A string of curse words were coming from him, most too British to understand. Spike was propped up on one hand with his back toward Xander. His other hand was clutching the top of the tombstone he was facing. His legs were sprawled out in a rather ungraceful manner, and Xander noticed a wheelchair a couple of feet away

that was tipped over on its side.

Xander remembered Buffy telling the Scoobies that she had seen Spike a few weeks ago in that very wheelchair. At the time he thought that was pretty funny. A master vampire confined to a wheelchair. And put there by the very Slayer he could never kill. Of course, Spike being alive at all was pretty dangerous. He would heal eventually and no doubt be coming after Buffy for what she did to him.

This scene, though, was neither funny nor dangerous. It was actually kinda sad. Surveying the scene, it wasn't too difficult to figure out what happened. Spike had apparently tried to walk. Not being completely healed, though, he had fallen and kicked his chair over. Xander continued to watch as Spike stopped cussing and just hung his head down. He felt a kind of pity start to rise up in himself and he contemplated whether or not to go help the sorry-looking vampire.

Just then, Spike's head whipped around and Xander's pity was instantly replaced with fear. Spike's eyes pierced through Xander, and the demon let out a deep growl and transformed into his vamp features - ready to strike. For a moment, Xander was paralyzed, his fear consumed

him. Then, bit by bit, he came to realize the he had the upper hand. Laying before him was a vampire who was immobilized. What was Spike really gonna do - spit at him? That realization seemed to hit Spike at the same time. Xander let the tension fall from his shoulders and started to grin a little. Spike pulled back his game face but kept the evil stare for a moment before slumping his shoulders as well.

"Bloody hell," the vampire mumbled and let his hand fall from the tombstone to the ground. He shifted until he was in a sitting position and used his hands to adjust his legs straight out in front of him. He leaned back on his palms and looked at Xander again.

"So, boy, where's your Slayer friend?" Spike hissed.
"Come here to put me out of my misery? Well, the timing couldn't be better, could it? Not gonna be putting up much of a fight."

"Sorry to disappoint, Spike. It's just me." It was strange to feel so relaxed around a brutal killer. Almost felt like doing a little 'nah-nah-nahnah-nah' dance. He took a moment to look the vampire over. Aside from his useless legs, Spike had other visible signs of his near death (re-death?) experience. Most notably, a nasty burn on the

he never treated her like a child. His being stuck in this bleedin' chair was causing the mommy to come out in Dru. There was nothing worse than having his Dark Princess lover think of him as nothing more than one of her dolls to be fawned over. Take that back - one thing worse. Having that same Dark Princess lover shagging her bloody sire right under his nose.

Then this. That doltish kid that followed the Slayer around practically laughing at him. The timing was just too perfect, wasn't it? Spike had to come here to see if he could just force his legs to start working again. It had been weeks. Why wasn't he mended yet? He just had to get out of the house, didn't he? Well, yeah, he did. Couldn't listen to the two of them at it again. They didn't even care that Spike could hear every groan, pant, and scream. Never did care.

"Arghhh!!" Spike yelled out into the sky. It was every bleedin' night! Every night Angelus would caress Dru's body and talk dirty in her ear - right in front of him!

Spike put up with it in the old days. Had to. Angelus was his grandsire and Dru's sire, and she was putty in his hands. Whatever Angelus wanted, Angelus got. Back when Dru first turned Spike, it took him quite a while to

come to terms with the fact that he had to share her with him. Drusilla was Spike's destiny, sire, mother, lover. Angelus had been away for a hundred years. Spike had gotten used to it being just the two of them. But Dru fell right back into the ponce's arms like no time had passed. Like those hundred years had meant nothing. Like he had meant nothing. And here he was. Putting up with it - again.

Spike shook his head clear. Couldn't do much about the situation sittin' here on the ground. He took in a deep unneeded breath and started crawling toward his capsized chair. When he reached it, he was able to right it with no trouble (upper body strength didn't seem to be a problem). He situated himself directly in front of the chair, grasped both arms and pulled himself up. When he made a move to twist his body around to get into the seat properly, his center of gravity suddenly shifted and he lost his balance. Just when he was about to hit the ground again, he felt two hands catch him underneath his arms.

He looked up and saw the Harris kid standing there holding him up. That was the last straw.

"Get your bloody hands off me!" Spike growled.

"Fine," the boy answered. But instead of letting him fall to the ground, which Spike expected, he lifted him all the way into the chair and dropped him into the seat. Spike watched confused as the kid walked away again.

"Hey!" Spike called after him. Harris stopped and turned around.

"What?"

"Uh...," *Why did I call out to him?* He could think of absolutely nothing to say. The boy stood there for moment longer than turned and continued on. Spike was left alone again, and he started to wheel his chair through the short grass back toward the factory he called home.

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The next day, Xander sat in History class tapping his pencil on his open book. His gaze was fixated out the window. He'd had some pretty crappy days in this high school, and, aside from all the near-death scare-a-paloozas, this was definitely the worst. Thanks to Ms.

Cordelia Chase's beautifully ironic breakup-on-Valentine's-Day-in-the-middle-of-the-crowded-Bronze extravaganza, the entire school was snickering at him behind his back. God, that wasn't even true. It was entirely in front of his back.

Xander had completely accepted his loserdom status at school. It allowed him to fade into the background and crack his little jokes and people would laugh and then forget about him. It used to bother him, but now he had such a wonderful tight knit group of friends, that he didn't care what outsiders thought of him...well, not too much, anyway (plus he had the gleeful secret knowledge that he had helped save all their sorry asses from an apocalyptic doom last year).

But all this attention given to him today - it was unbearable. Random guys punching him on the arm saying, "Way to get dumped, dude." The girls just outright laughing at him. Plus it just plain hurt. Cordy was hanging with her holier-than-thou gang again like the past few months with him didn't even happen. Like he didn't even matter.

This morning, Willow and Buffy were trying to be nice and supportive. But he could tell they were being

complacent and thought he was better off without Cordy anyway. He found himself suddenly missing Jesse. He hadn't really made another close male friend since Jesse died last year. Jess was a good guy. An idiot sometimes, and, sure, he usually thought with his dick, but hey, so did Xander most of the time. Jesse. Great, his brain had to go there. Now his depression got to go to a whole new fun level. Heartbreak depression was entirely different from killing-your-best-friend-because-he's-a-vampire depression. Blah! This day sucked!

Oh, goody. Now his thoughts had drifted from Jesse to vampires. Then to Spike. That was an unusual scene to be cast in last night. Xander was still trying to figure out what it was that possessed him to go back after he had started to walk away. Must have been that scream. Not the kind of noise he expected to hear from Spike. Xander had heard many different kinds of screams in the last couple of years. There was the startled scream, the panic scream, the blood-curdling pain scream. But the one coming from Spike last night was none of the above. It was something a little more... what?... personal? It had some kind of personal pain to it. It sounded something like... heartbreak. Huh? Was Spike's heart broken? *Well, that's just the most absurd thing I've ever thought of.*

The bell rang. Xander gathered his book and empty non-note-taking notebook, and took off swiftly down the hall in search of Buff and Will, trying desperately to ignore the not-so-gentle ribbing from everybody in the hall. He found his girls huddled around Buffy's locker and tried to put on his 'hey-look-at-me-I'm-totally-over-this-whole-getting-dumped-thing' face. *Wow...didn't even know I had a face for that. Good...more depression material. Welcome to Xander's Happy-Fun-Time World of the Seven Levels of Misery - Wednesdays are double coupon days - bring the kids!*

"Ladies, ladies! What's with all the low-talking? Is there mystery afoot? Big baddies abound? Apocalypses abrewin'?"

"Angel," Willow stated bluntly.

"Oh." *Okay, depression, Xander told his psyche, time to take a back seat and be support-o guy for the Buffster with her mucho grando psycho ex-boyfriend's head-trip of the week.*

Buffy leaned back against the open locker. "He gave me a warning last night in the guise of a joyful little romantic gesture. Giles told me that I need to lay low for a few

"Arghhhh!" Spike slammed his hands against his ears and pressed as hard as he could. *Again! Why can't that pompous eviler-than-thou poofter keep his bloody hands to himself?!*

He sat there in the central room of the factory with his head down, hands pressed against his ears. With his eyes squeezed shut tight, he concentrated on trying to drown out all the sounds that his vampire hearing insisted on picking up. He tried with all his might to think of anything besides his sire and grandsire naked and tearing at each other *and what the fuck is he doing that makes her make that cooing noise?* But his mind went nowhere. Those sounds just kept filling his head. It only brought back all the memories of when he shared his bed, not only with Dru, but with Angelus and Darla as well. The four of them had gone everywhere together and done everything. But that was more than a century ago. Things had changed. Angelus' claim over Dru was gone. Wasn't it? Shouldn't it be?

She's mine. She's mine, now! Spike screamed at Angelus in his head. *I won't let you have her. I can't.* But he knew he would. He always had. Spike could tell himself anything he wanted in his head, but in the end Angelus

always got his way. Always.

Spike opened his eyes and removed his hands from his ears. It was pointless. The sounds and thoughts weren't going away, so that meant *he* had to, again. As he began to roll his wheelchair toward the door, his eye caught something glimmer on the floor under a chair at the main table. He moved toward it and leaned down to discover it was the ruby necklace he had given Dru the day before, Valentine's Day. It was laid out on the floor where it had obviously been cast off absently. He had sent their last minion out to get it a few days before (minions were growing scarce nowadays with the Slayer seemingly coming out of every woodwork in town). Spike saw the necklace about a week ago in a store front window, when he was rolling about the streets trying to get away from the Dru/Angelus everlasting sex sounds...again. Dru loved shiny things, and it didn't matter that the necklace was stolen, she would still know it was expensive. She had mewed over it when he had presented it to her in a lovely velvet lined box, only to then start purring over Angelus' gift of a dripping human heart slapped unceremoniously on the table.

And there was the necklace. On the floor. Forgotten under a chair. No doubt torn off Dru's neck by the ponce

in a not so subtle attempt to strip Dru of all things Spike. Just because Angelus' soulful counterpart, Angel, had staked his own sire last year, did not give him the right to steal Spike's sire. It just wasn't fair.

Fair. Now that was a concept Angelus never understood. Angelus always went after the weakest of victims. And if they weren't weak when he discovered them, he would make them that way - through slow torture, usually involving the death of loved ones. It was what he did to Dru. It was what made her insane. And it wasn't fair. Now, as for Spike... 'fair' was his middle name. It just wasn't any fun if they didn't fight back. It was the fighting that got his bloodlust pumping. The hitting and getting hit. The pain, the fear, the screams. Drinking in the sounds of the competition's heartbeat, then after the battle was over, actually drinking in the heartbeat. That was fair, and that was fun. He never understood Angelus' method of slow torture. After a while they stopped fighting back, and only then did Angelus go for the kill. Nope. Spike didn't understand it.

He stretched down toward the necklace and managed to lean far enough to grasp it with the tips of his fingers. Sitting back up, Spike flipped it lightly into the air a couple of times before flinging it hard against a nearby

iron pillar. The rubies smashed to dust instantly and filled the room with an odd red glow for a few moments before settling on the ground to mix with the more common dust and debris.

As Spike continued to wheel himself outside into the welcoming darkness, his mind gifted him with a joyful image of Angelus exploding into that same kind of fateful and pointless dust.

Part Two

The night was fairly eventful. Buffy fought and killed three newly risen vamps, with Xander and Willow looking on from a safe distance. Xander did his absolute best to keep an eye on the perimeters at all times. They had been patrolling for a good three hours and had hit almost all the graveyards in town (a rather magnificent feat in itself), and he felt fairly certain that this was not the night that Angel was going to make any kind of move. With a little bit of both reasoning and whining, Willow

and Xander were able to convince Buffy of that, too.

Making their way out of the current cemetery they were in, Xander continued to keep a look out for any menacing jack-in-the-box creatures. He soon realized that this was the same place he had been the night before. Recalling that he should probably learn to differentiate between all these dark places that they've been patrolling the last two years, he took a mental note to remember the name of this particular graveyard.

Pleasant Fields. This is the one closest to Willow's house. It's the one with that big twisted scary oak tree at the east entrance. It's the one with the crypt with the weird gargoyle-like heads. It's the one with the very well kept lawn. It's the one with Spike. Spike?

Xander squinted his eyes to his right and, sure enough, there was Spike, smoking a cigarette and sitting on the very tombstone that Xander had found him crumpled next to last night. They were a good sixty or so yards away from him, but he could tell that Spike was looking in their direction. It was odd that Spike would choose a hair color that was so stand-outy. Weren't most creatures of the night supposed to blend into the scenery. *I'll have to ask him about that someday. What?!*

Ask Spike about his hair care habits? Ok, file that under the category of 'most bizarre and random thoughts.'

It crossed Xander's mind only briefly to call out to Buff and Will, who had already shifted out of patrol-mode and were talking about their weekend plans. He dashed the idea quickly, though. Spike obviously wasn't coming after them and Xander was kinda tired anyway and ready to be at home. He mentally shrugged Spike away and continued following the girls.

Feeling mostly safe as the three of them walked toward Willow's house to drop her off, Xander gave his mind permission to think about his own issues for a little while. As images of his past few months with Cordelia flashed through his mind, a wave of loneliness washed over him. He looked closely at the two women walking a few paces ahead of him. They were chattering on about something Oz-related. He had never seen Willow so happy. She had an honest-to-God boyfriend for the first time ever, and she was basking in the joy. Oz was a good guy, too, aside from the whole three-nights-a-month-I'll-kill-you-if-you-get-anywhere-near-me-no-matter-who-you-are werewolf thing. But, hey, we all have bad days. Xander hadn't found much in common with him yet, but there was a potential friendship possible. Maybe he could even

talk to Oz about this Cordy thing someday.

Cordy thing? There's a Cordy thing? That I need to talk about? Pretty straight forward, isn't it? Cordy dumped me. It sucks. I'm a little lonely. And there are my friends. Walking in front of me with happy thoughts of Oz and sad thoughts of Angel, and yet nobody has asked me anything about Cordy.

Sure, this morning they were all, "Oh, Xander, I'm so sorry, Are you okay, What can we do for you, She's an idiot (well, more of an idiot than usual) for not wanting you, blah, blah, blah." But that was it. Not one more mention of it since then. He knew he was putting on the I'm-over-it-face, but they were supposed to be his friends. They couldn't see through that? It had been a day. One freakin' day, for God's sake!

What is wrong with you people?! He found himself shouting at them in his head. He let a soft sigh escape his lips. Yeah, there's a Cordy thing. That I need to talk about. Damn.

A few minutes later, with Willow safe at home, it was just Buffy and Xander walking toward his place. Xander draped his arm across her shoulders pulling her closer to

him.

"How ya doin'?" he asked her.

"Hangin' in there." They were silent for a while longer and she slipped an arm around his waist and leaned into his shoulder. "Thanks for coming out tonight. I feel better with you guys close by."

"Hey, that's what we do. We're here for each other. Through everything. Good days, bad days, passing grades, failing grades, demon lovers, demon killers, new relationships, breakups..."

"Yeah. Don't know what I'd do without you." Buffy kept her head on Xander's shoulder the rest of the way to his house. When they reached his front door, she separated from him and gave him a peck on the cheek. "Thanks for tonight. Get some sleep, you look tired."

Xander closed the front door quietly behind him and leaned his back against it with his eyes shut. *What would I ever do without my bestest friends, Willow and Buffy?*

"You're late."

Xander's eyes shot open and spotted his father sitting in the worn yellow-but-wasn't-it-once-cream-colored recliner near the TV.

"You waited up," Xander said in a voice that sounded much more hopeful than he meant it to. His dad made a grunt-like noise, brought a bottle of sickly brown liquid to his mouth and took a deep swallow. *He's not even bothering to put it in a glass anymore.*

"You weren't waiting up," he responded to himself quietly and closed his eyes again. He continued to lean against the door listening to this dad-shaped figure take a couple more gulps from the bottle.

"Don't mind me," Xander whispered to the room and slipped back out the front door.

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Spike put his last cigarette between his lips, crumpled the pack into a tight ball, and flung it over his shoulder. He slowly brought his chrome Zippo up to the fag and drank in the sounds. A light clang when the lid flicked open. Tiny clicks as his thumb spun the tiny wheel. A small hiss

as the acid-scented liquid accepted the spark. A minute whoosh when the flame escaped. Spike drew in a short breath and heard the crackle of paper and tobacco. He closed the lighter quickly and stuffed it back in the pocket of his jeans.

The sounds were all around him. The leaves, the insects, the rodent scavengers, the wind. All providing a symphony of sound in the silence. It was easy to drown in. Spike had no idea why he had never noticed the silence before. From the moment he crawled out of his grave and for the next hundred and twenty years, all he heard was noise. It was always deafening and always bouncing in his brain trying to find a home. Never quite landing anywhere and eventually just taken over by some other noise and on and on and on. Wasn't it supposed to be that way? The noise was part of it, right? That's why the enhanced hearing. You need to know what's going on around you. Always moving. Always hunting. Relishing the screams. This was good. All good. But the silence. This was good, too. Better? Probably not. But good. Definitely good.

An owl. Wind in the trees. A very distant car. The paper/tobacco crackle. An insect buzz. Footsteps in the grass. Footsteps in the grass? Quiet footsteps. Not the

loud footsteps of the annoying Slayer and her posturing pals who had been gabbing away through his private symphony a few minutes ago. These were determined footsteps. Coming toward him.

Harris. By himself. Spike could smell him before he saw him. The kid's own essence of sweat and chocolate and Ivory soap. Plus something else. What was that? It wasn't fear. None at all. Not even the tiny bit that was coming off of him last night. Not pity either. The kid was lucky for that. Spike would have found some way to rip him open if he continued to exude that sickening scent of pity. Still, though, there was something else. Despair?

The kid strolled to a headstone about ten feet in front of Spike. He sat on top of it and wiggled around a little to get comfortable. He looked up and stared directly into Spike's eyes. The vampire was dumbstruck and pissed off. The only humans that have ever not shown any fear around him were the Slayers he fought (*killed two 'em - he reminded himself to stroke his ego*). *This boy, this insignificant boy, has the balls to just sit there. Sit there and stare. What's he playing at?*

"My girlfriend broke up with me yesterday," Harris said casually. Spike raised an eyebrow at the kid. "I know,

you're thinking, 'well, duh, cause who would want to go out with you?', but it was a bit of a shocker for me. I mean, I know it shouldn't have been, but I thought we were really starting to have something. I thought it was really starting to click, you know?"

The boy has gone completely 'round the bend. What is he talking about? "What the hell you doing here, kid?"

"And that's the part that really gets to me. That fact that I actually *thought* we were starting to click. I mean - Cordelia?! What was I thinking? Sure, when we were alone in the car or the broom closet or whatever, she can't get enough of the XanMan, and really, who could blame her, but if she has to admit to her friends that she might actually like hanging out with me, then it's bye-bye lovin', hello pain and humiliation."

"It's torture, right?" Spike ventured. "The Slayer told you to come here and slowly torture me with mindless drivel." He flicked away his cigarette. "This is ridiculous." He shifted on the stone toward his wheelchair that sat just within reach to his left. Just before he was able to lay a hand on one of the back handles, the chair was suddenly pulled away. Spike's head darted up, and he saw the kid dragging it back to the other tombstone and

he was going when he left the house. Nor was it a surprise that Spike was still sitting in the same place that he saw him twenty minutes earlier. The plan was to just talk. To get it out of his head. Maybe if he could vocalize it, then it wouldn't be all jumbled up inside. He could make sense of it. He would feel better.

The big surprise came when he saw Spike start to try and leave. It triggered some instinctual reaction in him that released a bit o' mean-Xander that he rarely let out to play. Most recently it had been Angel who had been tapping into mean-Xander (well, and that one time during the whole being-possessed-by-a-hyena fiasco), *but if Spike thinks I'm going to let him just roll away from me like I don't even matter, then I'm gonna let out a little mean.*

Now, Spike was emanating a constant low growl. What was it about this evil creature sitting in front of him that didn't scare him? Xander knew that he was a walking HappyMeal as soon as Spike was healed. And really, how much longer was that going to take? A couple months? Only weeks, maybe? (Even the burn mark looked better than it had yesterday.) But it wasn't important to think about that right now. Right now, he just had to talk. And somebody had to listen. So, over the sounds of Spike's

Okay, maybe the boy wasn't tuned out completely. His voice seemed to be pretty easy to listen to. It's not like he was actually saying anything to Spike, just kinda...near him. So Spike started hearing his symphony again. He let the boy's words incorporate themselves into all the other noises, making his 60-piece orchestra sound more like an improvisational jazz band.

Pretty soon, the music started to become more hypnotic. Spike closed his eyes. He let the sounds engulf him like a wave. He wanted to be lost in it. All the world to go away and let it be just him and his sounds. They moved and danced and flowed and breathed and pulsated. Pulsated? What was that? *What is that?*

His little concert suddenly had percussion. Spike recognized the sound, but had never heard it beat so slowly before. He loved the sound, but he was used to it pounding in his head hard and fast when he knew there was heat and blood and fear. He was supposed to be the cause of that fear. Now it was just a quiet steady thumping. A bump-bump, then a pause. Bump-bump, then pause. Bump-bump.

He opened his eyes. The kid was still talking. Spike was fascinated. Not by anything he was saying, but by this

heartbeat. This completely calm and rhythmic heartbeat. There was no fear, no anger, no desperation. Just bump-bump. Pause. Bump-bump.

It was more than a wave, it was an ocean. It was a cascade of breakers from an endless horizon and knowing that they would keep coming and hit him again and again and again. Each time pushing him under the water and the deeper he fell, instead of the quiet ocean darkness, the music would get louder and more colorful and poetic and the ocean was not cold but warm and there was the bump-bump, pause, bump-bump, pause, bump-bump...

The boy had stopped talking. Jazz became symphony again and still bump-bump, pause...Spike brought his mind out of the water and saw Harris looking at him. It was an expression that he couldn't quite read. Something close to irritation, but also a little bit of concern. Not really pity, though, just thoughtful concern. Odd.

The kid hopped down and dragged the wheelchair back over to its original position next to Spike. Instead of leaving though, he went back to the headstone and sat down again.

“Your turn,” Harris said, his head tilted slightly and arms folded across his chest.

“My turn, what?” What exactly is this Slayer-wanna-be doing, anyway? Sitting here, in the middle of the night, invading my private backroom concert with his smells and voice and heartbeat.

“Who hurt you?”

“You know who did this - Slayer dropped an organ on me.” Okay, this kid was back to being really really annoying.

“I don’t mean that, and you know it. I talked, you listened. Okay, maybe you weren’t really paying attention, but it doesn’t matter. Now I listen. That’s the way it works. That’s what’s fair.”

Spike leaned down toward his chair, put his left hand on the far arm and pushed himself off the tombstone and down into the seat in one quick motion (privately thanking the powers-that-be for not letting him fall in front of the boy again).

"Sod off," he absently told the kid, and wheeled himself out of the graveyard.

Part Three

"That's your brilliant plan?"

"More or less, yeah. Got a problem, Spikey?"

"Oh, no. Go ahead. Take your time. I don't mind waiting around for my bones to heal. By the time they do, the Slayer still won't be dead, and I'll have a chance at her again myself."

"You've never been very patient, boy."

"This endearing lack of patience quality that I have is why two Slayers are dead by my hands."

"Buffy's different."

"Of course, this Slayer's different. Makes it that much more fun."

"Fun, Special-Needs-Boy? Didn't know you were having

fun rolling around in the middle of the night hoping some young innocent will just walk up to you, sit in your lap, and expose her neck."

"It's the fight that's fun, you git! How do you not enjoy it? Why on earth would you want to slap her down so hard before you even get a chance to start the dance?"

Angelus backed out of Spike's face, strutted over to the factory's central table and sat cross legged in the middle of it.

Lovely, Spike thought, the Great Forehead is about to get smug.

"If I recall correctly," Angelus smirked, "you weren't so eager to 'dance' last Halloween. Didn't you go after Buffy when she was at her weakest?"

Spike shrugged. "Thought I'd try it your way once. Didn't work though, did it?" He snarled at the figures in front of him. Dru had been laying on the table watching her hands move in front of her face. Angelus was now sitting next to her legs, running his fingers lightly up her thighs and under her skirt.

Dru started giggling and purring. Anger was boiling inside Spike, and he realized he was gripping the wheels of his chair so hard that his fingers were cutting into the spokes. He tried to keep the conversation going so as to put off as long as possible another searing rendition of Dru and Angelus' Public Performance of Pleasure and Pain.

"I fully admit the Slayer has smacked me down a couple times, but there's a reason we get a new one every few years. We're better than her. It's simple. Vampire. Slayer. Vampire *kills* Slayer. Dru and I have lasted over a hundred years and you for almost two and half centuries. The Slayer has speed and power, but in the end, we always win. Always. So in the mean time, we dance. We fight. That's what keeps us alive inside. The blood pumping. You want to bring her down to an innocent level and pick her off like any other random kill. You plan to leave her little prezzies in her bed and kill her friends one by one, which is your MO, fine. But this time, it's not going to work. You were right - this Slayer is different, which means that you're not going to drive her mad, you're just going to piss her off."

Angelus had stopped listening. If he ever was. He had pushed Drusilla's skirt all the way up to bunch around her

waist, and *oh, that's why she coos...*

No thanks, didn't buy tickets to this show. With fingers dripping blood from the cuts from the metal on his wheelchair, Spike propelled himself out the door as quickly as he could.

``*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Xander was sitting in the dark kitchen eating Fruit Loops and drinking chocolate milk. It was another crappy day at school. Most of the guys had stopped pestering him, but the girls, mostly Cordelia's connected-at-the-hip band of Cordettes, had made it their game-of-the-day to make fun of him at every turn of the corner. All, of course, with Cordy standing right there in the mix. Usually not saying anything, but also not stopping it or coming to Xander's defense in any way. Not that he expected her to, but... well, every once in a while he would see that look on her face. The one that he remembered seeing on those quiet nights in the back seat of her daddy's car. And he wondered...*was there a chance I was right? Is there something special about Cordy that only I can see?*

The most important thing right now was to erase the last

two days from his brain. Concentrate on school and slayage research and not worry about the fact that his friends are a little too wrapped up in their own lives to think that he might be hurting a little here. Okay. Point was to not think about that. Not think about the fact that Willow started to show a slight interest in his life when she asked him how he was doing at his locker today only to be immediately distracted when Oz sauntered up and Xander never even got to answer the question. Nope. Definitely don't think about that.

Just eat Fruit Loops. Eat yummy cereal, drink yummy thick chock-full-o-vitamins-goodness-that-is-only-chocolate-milk, and not think about the dark kitchen with the burned out light bulb and no spares anywhere in the house. *Mmm. Cereal good.*

Xander looked up from his bowl and let his gaze settle on the street outside the window, not being able to stop the flow of thought no matter how hard he tried. He was tired. He thought that talking it out last night would make him feel better, but it somehow made him feel a little more incomplete. Okay, yeah, he was able to get some Cordy things off his chest. And that was good, and maybe there were even more things he had to say, but damn it! why did he have to say them all to an annoying

crippled vampire who wasn't really listening to him anyway.

What a sad little vampire Spike was nowadays. Trying so hard to be menacing, but just coming across as angry and bitter. And maybe that original thought of him being heartbroken wasn't really so bizarre. *I mean, here I am, King of Anguish, and yet something must have happened in this person's life, or nonperson's unlife, to cause him to have a look of such desperation and sadness.* And then later, when the vampire had zoned out, the look had changed and it seemed like Spike was anywhere but there. *It was as if he had found some private place. Someplace that had all the things he wanted with no need to rely on anyone else while he was there.* Xander longed for such a place. And wanted desperately for Spike to show him how to get there.

It upset him to think that Spike had something that Xander didn't. And it was something he wanted. Some kind of peace of mind, perhaps. A secret knowledge that it was all going to be ok.

And, now, why did it not surprise him to suddenly see Spike across the street rolling down the sidewalk? The darkness inside the room allowed for a clear view into

the darkness outside. And there was the platinum blonde, turning the wheels of his chair fairly quickly, and he looked up at the house once, just a glance, but Xander knew that Spike had seen him, sitting at the table next to the kitchen window. The vampire kept moving, without breaking pace; kept heading east, down the sidewalk and then out of sight.

Xander couldn't break his stare from the window. *Ok, WonderBoy, three options. A - get up, go to your room, lay down, stare at the ceiling, try not to think (even though you know you will), and fall asleep only out of pure exhaustion after a few hours. Option B - get up, throw caution to the wind, follow Spike to the graveyard, and...what? Talk? Listen? Where exactly would that particular course of action lead you? Okay. Option C - get up, throw caution to the wind, follow Spike to the graveyard, and get really really killed by Angel because this is so obviously a set up and you are an incredible moron for thinking otherwise.*

Fine. Option A - sucks. Option B - workable only if Option C didn't exist. However, if Option C existed, then Option A wouldn't be a problem because, hey, life wouldn't suck if you're dead. Oh, great reasoning, Xand.

Xander slowly got up and put his dirty dishes into the already overflowing sink. He shuffled down the hallway to his bedroom and squinted at the brightness when he turned on the light. He looked at his unmade bed for a moment, then grabbed his jacket, cross and stake, flicked off the light and walked back down the hall.

Moron, he told himself as he left the house.

``*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

Spike was trying to get his symphony back. This was the show he *did* buy tickets to, yet he couldn't get the curtain to go up. All the sounds were there, but it was like the orchestra was constantly tuning its instruments, and the music wouldn't start.

So he sat there on the same headstone in the same graveyard racking his brain to figure out what was missing. He searched all the pockets of his leather duster and his jeans looking for a pack of fags before remembering that he smoked the last one yesterday and forgot to steal more. He found his lighter in his front jeans pocket and started flicking the lid open and closed. Without thinking about it, his mouth found the barely

closed wounds on the fingers of his other hand, and he tongued the cuts just enough to open them again.

Tasting his own blood trickle across his tongue, he began to wonder where this oral fixation came from. It could just be the vampire thing, but he had a vague memory of always having something in his mouth back when he was human. He somehow recalled that it was usually the tip of a pen which caused a near permanent ink spot on his lip. That spot didn't truly fade away until after he died, at which point the ink was replaced with blood. Maybe that's why he was the most vicious of everyone in his little family back then. Being a creature of the night, he didn't have the need or desire to write poetry like his human-self did, so he no longer carried pen and ink with him at all times. But he needed something in his mouth and sinking his teeth into the closest random person seemed like a handy and tasty alternative.

Okay, maybe this wasn't such a good idea. All this nonmusical quiet was causing him to think way too much. Who cared why he was a brutal ruthless killer? He just was. That was that. Needed a better distraction than sucking on fingers. Oh, is that Harris? Smells more like chocolate than sweat and soap this time, but, yeah, that's definitely the kid. Good. *Good? Why, good? Why is*

he back here anyway?

"Bloody hell. The Bronze would be more private. Why do you keep showing up?" Spike tapped his dripping fingers on the headstone and continued to flick the lighter with his left hand, keeping a stern eye on the boy who was settling onto the headstone directly opposite him. Same as last night.

"You don't want me around, Spike, maybe you shouldn't keep picking the same spot every night. By the way, you seemed to be getting pretty good at getting in and out of that chair. No more humpty-dumpty moments since the first time I saw ya?"

The whelp was really enjoying this, wasn't he? Spike scowled and started sucking on a cut on one of his fingers again. They both sat there in silence for a short time, and soon Spike started to zone out. He realized that the sucking on his finger was getting rhythmic and slowly his symphony started coming into tune. After a few minutes, though, there was no more blood coming from the wound and he suddenly felt very self-conscious and silly with his finger in his mouth. He removed it quickly with an unfortunate pop sound and saw Harris looking at him with reserved amusement.

"How'd you cut your finger?" Spike was surprisingly relieved that the kid noticed the blood and wasn't assuming he had reverted to some child-like state of thumb-sucking. He quickly formulated a snarky response, but instead what came out was -

"Metal spokes on wheel." He nodded down toward the chair to his left and Harris nodded in response.

Okay...he's still sitting there, not asking anything else. This is an odd kid. "Something pissed me off and I was gripping pretty hard." Now, why am I explaining this? Boy's just looking at me. This is supposed to be the talkative one. The one that always has some smartass thing to say that causes the Slayer to roll her eyes at him half the time. Say something, whelp! Kid was just sitting there looking at him. Unnerving, somehow. He found himself talking -

"Fucking ponce struts around like he's still the head of the family! We were perfectly happy without him. Then your Slayer spreads her dainty knees for him and bam! he's back in our unives and I don't even really think he's the same. That disgusting soul was creepin' around under his skin for too long. There's something...off about him. We used to..."

Spike focused his eyes on Harris again and was dumbfounded by what had been coming out of his own mouth. But the kid continued to sit there. Like he was listening or something. He didn't feel like saying anything more though. Couldn't believe he said what he did. So he sat there, too, and pretty soon the noises started to become music again. This time, though, the concert included that beautiful drum beat from last night, and Spike realized why he was glad to see the kid earlier. Bump-bump, pause, bump-bump, pause, bump-bump...

"'We used to...' what?" Harris' question penetrated Spike's ears and thankfully did not interrupt the concert. The music faded slightly, but the percussion was still there. Still strong.

"We used to be a family. The four of us. Technically, Darla was the head, but Angelus was much better in the role. He kept us together. And as much as I strayed from his rules and plans, it was always the place to go home to." Bump-bump, pause, bump-bump... "Even when we didn't have a home, as long as we were all together it felt like we could take over the world. Now he's back and it's not about family anymore. It's only about him getting his rocks off either with Dru or with the Slayer. And I'm

suddenly the sidekick. The wacky neighbor to take a few jabs at then dismiss like some minion or human. It was better when it was me and Dru." Bump-bump, pause, bump-bump... "Now, it's the Dru and Angelus show - shagging every bleedin' second of every bleedin' day and night. He waltzed in and took over. She's a puddle around him."

"I always knew Angel was an asshole," Harris offered. "So...what? He just took Drusilla from you? Weren't you guys together for, like, ever?"

"My entire unlife, yeah, but don't say it like that. We're not over. It's just...his turn."

"His turn? That's disgusting! Doesn't she have any pride? Oh, wait, she's crazy."

"Crazy, yeah. Pride, yeah, she's got that. But you gotta understand the way things are with us. Vampires, I mean. Once you become a member of a family then sex is part of it. He's her sire, just like she's mine." Bump-bump, pause, bump-bump... "But, with me and Dru, there was more. Angelus just wants her because she's his childe, but I want her because she's...." It occurred to Spike that this chocolate-smelling whelp couldn't possibly

understand the true nature of his love for Dru. "Never mind."

"Oh, no - you got me all interested, now. You want her because - what? Do you love her? You must. I mean, a hundred plus years. Man. I can't even get a relationship to last three months. Of course, Drusilla's a complete loon. And there really is no accounting for taste."

"Hey!" Bump-bump, pause, bump-bump...

"Well, tell me what you mean, then. You want her because...?"

Spike shook his head. He really couldn't believe that he was having a conversation, *this* conversation, with Xander Harris, the token loser of the Slayer's merry band of Slayerettes. He had to admit, though, he liked listening to that heartbeat. It wasn't just that it was slow and calm and steady. There was something else inviting. It was strong, powerful...infinite. That's it. It is infinite. Spike had no immediate plan to kill this guy. Perhaps later, when there could be a chase, but for now, the kid knew that he was in no immediate danger (which was still really annoying).

Spike closed his eyes. He couldn't hunt. Therefore couldn't feed on anything that wasn't brought to him. He couldn't have Dru, for now. He could barely stand to be at the factory for any length of time. But he had this. The sounds in this graveyard accompanied by the soft pounding of blood, reminding him that he had a future. There was blood in his future. He just had to learn to be as calm and patient as that heartbeat. He could do that. Yeah. Bump-bump, pause, bump-bump... He opened his eyes.

"I want her because she's my destiny. She picked me. Dru saved me from a life of endless tedium and rejection. She gave me strength and immortality and desire. A desire for power and blood and violence. She showed me the world. A place where I could have anything I wanted. I just had to take." Bump-bump, pause, bump-bump, pause, bump-bump... "Dru's heart may be still, but it is more full of life than anyone I've ever met, living or dead. She doesn't have two stones rolling around in that head of hers, yet she is capable of profound insight and theory. She is delicate and soft, but she's one of the most brutal killers of the last two hundred years. You could fill an ocean with the amount of blood she's spilled." Bump-bump, pause, bump-bump... "She's a child, yet she's an adventurous lover who can still surprise me with what

she's capable of in the bedroom. Yeah. I love her. More than you could possibly imagine."

"But, now... it's his turn?"

Spike felt his demon rise quickly and his eyes start to glow gold. "Yeah. His turn..."

Part Four

It had been a very disturbing couple of days. Buffy was more wiggled out than he had ever seen her. Even more so than when she found out she was destined to die last year. Of course, it was Angel who was doing it. Leaving little hints that he had been in her house. The fucker had even been in Willow's room. Killed her fish. And then tonight he got to Buffy's mom and told her about their fateful little rendezvous. Poor Buffy. At least they were able to do the invitation reversal spell. Certainly hope they'll both think twice about letting a strange, tall, brooding vampire-passing-as-a-man into their homes.

Maybe Xander shouldn't be one to judge, though. He had spent the last four nights in a graveyard having what amounts to a very normal conversation with an odd, small, pining manlike-creature-trying-hard-to-still-be-a-vampire. And maybe it had only been a few days, but he was actually beginning to rely on these little encounters. Spike would let him talk about random things, asking questions every now and then, but mostly just letting him talk. He found out that Cordy wasn't the only thing he had needed to get off of his chest. Spike's talk of family prompted Xander to start reflecting on his own home life, and he was able to regale to the vampire some of his own tales of parental woes. The vamp seemed to enjoy hearing about his failures and disappointments. Evil little bastard. It was somehow okay, though. It was the talking that kept him going back. Being able to have someone, even an evil dead someone, let him just talk. It calmed him. No matter what had happened at school that day, or how bad he was teased by the Cordettes, or how self-involved his best friends were (even if they did have the right to be), he was able to just loose himself in that graveyard, talking to Spike. Buffy would never understand.

Plus, Xander was learning some pretty fun and disturbing

facts about vampire-life (unlife, that is). Spike told him mostly about the adventures he and that bizarre Drusilla had together. Places they'd been, people they'd killed, even some unexpected sex stories that he was able to lock away in a file only to be opened when he had met just the right women with a very big open mind (and that would happen any day now, right?).

Tonight as he was walking to Pleasant Fields, he was in good spirits. An early patrol with Buffy had been fruitful. She dusted one vamp and only after Xander had jumped on its back and distracted it (WonderBoy moment!). Now, his ladies were safe in their homes with the knowledge that no nasty vamp could come in uninvited. Xander entered the cemetery whistling and swinging his stake in his hand. When he saw Spike, though, he instantly knew something was wrong.

The blonde was still sitting in his chair, hands on the wheels and rocking it back and forth causing two tiny strips of grass to disintegrate leaving only dirt. His head was down and he was softly mumbling and cussing, very much like he had been the first time Xander found him here. He slowly walked up to him and stood much closer than he would have felt comfortable just a week before.

"Spike?" Xander reached out and put a hand on his shoulder stopping the chair.

The vampire whipped his head up at Xander in full game face. He was growling and practically hyperventilating. Xander didn't think vampires breathed, but sure enough, Spike was taking in and exhaling quick shallow breaths like his unlife depended on it. His gold eyes were shimmering brighter than he had ever seen. Xander took a step back quickly with both hands raised defensively in the air.

"What the hell, Spike!" The vampire growled at Xander, causing him to take another step away. He tried to remain calm. "You gonna tell me what's going on, or do I stake you right now and save me and rest of the globe a world of hurt?"

Spike's breathing steadied slightly, but he kept his game face on. "A century. He took a century from me. They forgot. They both completely forgot. And he'll pay. He'll suffer. Then they'll remember. They'll remember who I am. I haven't changed and they'll remember."

Xander took a step closer again, and squatted down next to Spike. He put a hand on one of the wheelchair's arms.

"Okay, I get that something is going on with Angel and Drusilla, but we already knew this. Did something specific happen tonight?" Even through the vampire's wrinkled brow and gold eyes, Xander could see all the anger and confusion. He knew that this was ridiculous. He knew that he should back away and let Spike rant about whatever was up with him, but this was what Xander did best. This is what he knew how to do. He helped. Maybe it was all he knew how to do.

Spike started rocking the chair back and forth again, almost running over Xander's toes if he hadn't staggered back about a foot. He stayed squatted, his eyes rooted on Spike, determined to show the vampire that he wasn't going anywhere.

``*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*`*

"Stupid kid," Spike growled. And through the rage boiling inside of him and the hurt that was taking over no matter how much he tried to turn it into anger, he heard it. The heartbeat. And he wanted it to calm him. He knew he needed it. But he couldn't suppress the hurt. And this other thing that came with the hurt. He could smell the

wants to see the jungles. She never told me that."

Xander stood up and leaned against the headstone that was normally Spike's seat. He crossed his arms and tried to find a way to make it better. He needed more info.

"What triggered this? You said Drusilla had some sort of a vision? What lady is going to do what?"

Spike's breathing had stopped. He gave Xander a look that he couldn't read. "The teacher chit. The one who teaches computers."

"Miss Calendar? Drusilla had a vision about Miss Calendar? Well, that's all sorts of badness. What was the vision?"

"Something about bringing Angel back."

"Angel? You mean...what do you mean?"

"Restore his soul, you git. Curse him again."

"Wait. Miss Calendar can do that? She said she couldn't. So, that means that Angel would be good again. Well, that's....I don't really know how I feel about that. I enjoy

turned north and ran toward the school, only a half mile away.

When he approached the double doors closest to the library, he had to stop and fumble in his pockets for the key. Giles had given all the Scoobies a key to the school for comings and goings involving late night research parties. He finally found the correct one on his key chain (*what the hell do I have all these keys for? only need two*), threw open the doors, and ran down the hall and into the library.

The phone was on the checkout desk. He picked it up and pressed *2, the speed dial for Giles. It rang twice.

"Giles here."

"Giles! Listen - Angel is on his way to kill Miss Calendar. Right now! We need to get Buffy."

"Xander? What? Jenny? He's going to kill Jenny? Are you sure? How do you know?"

"No time to explain. I'm very sure."

"Well, I assume she's at home, and he can't get in unless

invited. I'm sure she's safe."

"Giles, he'll find a way. God, just trust me on this! We need to get to her. Where does she live?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Um...1214 Bayberry Court. Number 5."

"Go there now. Call Buffy - I'll be there as soon as I can!"
He slammed the phone down and ran into the library cage. He flung open the doors of the metal weapons cabinet and grabbed a small battle axe and the crossbow and arrows. Taking a moment to load one arrow into the crossbow, he ran out of the library.

He was almost to the exit, when a noise near the student lounge stopped him. He looked to his left, up the staircase, and there was Angel, standing on the mezzanine landing of the stairs. The vampire was in full game face and looking up toward the top of the stairway and suddenly, there was Miss Calendar. She stumbled down the stairs quickly and screamed when she landed in Angel's arms.

"Sorry, Jenny. This is where you get off," Angel put a hand on her chin and one on the back of the teacher's

head.

Now, now, now! Xander's brain was screaming at him. With shaking hands, he lifted the crossbow toward the two on the stairs. He aimed, and fired.

It was the luckiest shot he had ever made. Xander barely saw the wooden arrow fly and, instantly, there it was, sticking out of the vampire's chest. Angel turned his head and looked down the stairs. His eyes momentarily got wide, then quickly narrowed.

"You?" was the startled question, then Angel exploded into dust.

There was a loud clatter as the arrow fell to the ground. Then a soft moan as Miss Calendar did the same.

Epilogue

He pulled up to the apartment building in Miss Calendar's car. She was curled up in the passenger's seat and hadn't said much after she had woken up on the stairs at the school. Xander found a parking space near the front door and helped his teacher out of the car. He kept a hand around her waist as they entered the lobby of the building, past a front door that was easy to open due to a destroyed lock.

They made their way to her apartment on the second floor, finding the door kicked in. Buffy and Giles were inside looking panic stricken. When Miss Calendar saw Giles, she fell into his arms and began sobbing. The younger two watched as Giles guided the woman into her bedroom and shut the door behind them.

Buffy turned to Xander and laid a hand gently on his arm.

"Angel?" she asked. The look of fear on her face caused a spark of anger to flare through Xander's body. He made a small attempt to suppress it, but couldn't.

"Dust," he told her, then instantly regretted using that word instead of something a little gentler. He was tired of seeing sadness in his friends' eyes. He was supposed to be the one who made everyone smile. Made them

laugh. It was his job to protect the people around him. And in order to save Miss Calendar, he had killed his best friend's true love. He had no idea if she would ever forgive him.

A/N for those who have read my fic Backfire: I know, I know. I have a thing for killing Angelus. Can't help it. He's an evil fuck. I like my men to have a little mystery to them. And Angelus, he was obvious. Not worth too much time in my stories. I actually don't purposely start a story to kill him, just happens. Oh well.

Part 2 - Prologue

“I thought we were friends.”

“We are.”

“I really hate you.”

“Not for long.”

“Did you get what you wanted?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“I really hate you.”

“I know.”

Part Five

Three weeks earlier

Things were looking up. After only a few days of rest, Miss Calendar was back teaching classes. She told Xander that as long as he stayed after school with her a couple days a week so she could make sure he understood at least the concept of the technology, then he would be getting a passing grade in computer science, no homework required. Little hero perk. Who knew?

The explanation to Giles as to why he knew what Angel was going to do was a little tricky. It had been the day after 'the incident' and the Watcher had asked Xander to meet him in the library before the others arrived. Xander had been going over in his mind what he was going to

say, and when the time came, he still didn't know. The truth was always an option, but the possible verbal whipping he would get from that revelation was a little more than Xander was prepared to take. He settled for a sampling of the truth.

Xander told Giles that he was walking to Buffy's after he heard about Angel's visit to her house that night and came across Spike near a cemetery. He said that Spike never saw him, but was instead mumbling to himself and Xander was able to make out snippets of the one-sided conversation. He deciphered that the vampire was upset about some kind of plans Angel and Drusilla had made without him and that was when Spike said something like, 'after they kill the teacher tonight.' Xander filled in the blanks.

Giles mulled over that story, but Buffy, Willow, and Oz came into the library before he was able to ask any questions. After a few days of avoiding Giles anytime he got that inquisitive look in his eye, the 'overhearing Spike' story was generally accepted as what happened and everyone left it alone.

Buffy was also playing the avoidy-game with Xander during those days. He wasn't at all sure if it was because

his body was telling him that this was a bad idea. What with Angel gone, he was sure that Spike and Drusilla had gotten back into their wicked ways. That was obviously the reason why Spike hadn't been at the cemetery this past week. He'd got his crazy vampire back.

But there was a part of Xander that needed to know. He needed to know that Spike was alright. And that was even scarier than standing this close to a vampire's lair with god knows how many vamps inside who would drain him in an instant.

Xander told his feet to move, and he cautiously walked over to a window. It took him several tries to find a window that had glass that wasn't completely obstructed with black paint. Finally, in a small dark alley at the side of the building, he found one that wasn't painted quite as well. Peering through a layer of dirt and grime, he was able to get a fairly decent view of a large room with a long rectangular table surrounded by tall high-backed chairs. And, oddly enough, that was it. There were no vampires anywhere. Xander looked as close as he could at all the dark corners, but, even though it was eleven o'clock at night, there was no activity.

Well, maybe they left town. Or found a new place to hide

out or something.

Then there he was. Spike came out of a room to Xander's left and rolled his wheelchair slowly past the large table toward a doorway on the other side of the room. Xander only saw Spike's back, but there was something odd about the way the vampire was moving. It was too slow, and not quite in a straight line. One hand kept slipping off the wheel of the chair, causing him to turn abruptly to one side or the other before he was able to readjust and go forward again. Almost like he was swaggering. And not in a cool John-Wayne-in-True-Grit kind of swagger, but more like a dad-are-you-sure-you-need-to-finish-the-entire-six-pack kind of swagger.

Xander backed away from the window and leaned against the opposite wall. He really wished that he hadn't thought about his father. His father. Who had switched from a six-pack a day to a fifth of scotch a day a long time ago. His dad. Who Xander knew was the reason his mother spent too much time at bridge clubs and garden clubs and book clubs. Dad. Who left bruises that were easier to explain away now that Xander was fighting demons from time to time. Dad. Who Xander had given up on. Who was hopeless. Who was beyond...help. *Help.*

The world was spinning. He didn't even have to open his eyes to see it. He could feel it. For just a moment he wished that he was human so he could vomit. Getting up wasn't an option. Hell, opening his eyes wasn't even an option. If he just laid perfectly still, then maybe he could pass out again. Wait. When did he pass out? *How did I get on the bed?*

Harris. The memory was there but a tad muddled. He remembered most of the last few days. But, really there wasn't much to remember. And how long had it been, anyway? He knew that he had fallen asleep and woken up several times, but he couldn't hone his senses to place the time of day right now. And Harris was there at some point. Did they have a conversation?

Spike didn't like this quiet. It wasn't right. He could only hear the old noises that a decrepit building makes and it just wasn't enough. No wind, no animals, no distant cars, no heartbeat. He tried to remember the conversation he had with Harris last night (was it last night?) so he could grasp the memory of the heartbeat, but nothing came to him. *Exactly how long did I stay drunk? And why am I sobering up now? Oh, yeah.* That part he remembered. He had run out of alcohol.

Then it really all came flooding back to him. The why he was drinking in the first place. Dru was gone. And he wanted to forget again.

He focused on Harris, instead. More was coming back to him. Okay, he had run out of alcohol. Had scoured the entire factory twice over looking for anything that would keep him drunk. When he was tearing apart the cobwebs in the back of the kitchen cabinets, the whelp had showed up out of nowhere, screamed something at him, then just stood there and stared. It had been highly annoying. Spike told him to leave, unless he had come with a bottle of JD, but the kid just continued to look at him with a completely confused look on his face. Spike made a move to lunge at the boy, and that's when everything went black.

And now he was here on the bed. Had Harris put him to bed? Great. Just great. He had passed out in front of Harris the WimpBoy and had needed to be put to bed like a sick child. He wanted to vomit again.

Then another memory came flashing into focus. He remembered fading back into consciousness once after seeing Harris. He had been on the bed and the kid had

Xander could count each one even through the t-shirt. Normally tight jeans that hung off the man like a pair of Xander's own sweatpants. A skeleton with flesh. But not even really flesh. Skin that clung to bones in an almost translucent state that revealed thin blue veins. Veins as thin as thread and as light blue as a too bright afternoon sky. But not dead. Not the right kind of dead. Vampires were living dead. This vampire deserved more.

As he stared down at Spike, Xander began to feel a sense of dread that perhaps he was too late. Was it even possible to bring a vampire back to its normal virile self when the body looked like this? And more importantly, why did he even want to? He had had this conversation with himself last night after dragging an unconscious Spike from the kitchen to the bedroom. He had made up his mind to help the vampire, but was still trying to wrap his head around why he was doing it.

During the few times that they talked, Spike had revealed himself to be a man of profound emotion. Xander discovered that a vampire, well, this vampire at least, could feel and laugh and love. And change perhaps? Was Xander willing to take the chance of restoring this demon if he was just going to go back to trying to kill his friends?

Spike's eyes opened, causing Xander to jump back just a tad. They looked at each other for a beat before he was able to relax and smile a little.

"Brought you some blood," Xander told the corpse and shivered as Spike let a slow grin spread across his face that reinforced the skeleton motif by adding a skull to the top of the body.

"You brought me somebody to eat?" The skull asked.

"No! And eww!" Xander set down a brown paper bag on the table next to the bed. "Pig's blood. From the butcher. And can I just say again - eww."

Spike let the smile fade away and made an attempt to push himself to a seated position on the bed. His arms started to shake a little under his own insignificant weight, and Xander instinctively put his hands under Spike's arms to steady him. Spike growled at him, so he backed off with his hands in the air. He looked around the room and settled down into a large black leather chair in a corner.

The vampire was able to get himself adjusted against the headboard. He reached over to the bedside table and

took one of the two containers of blood out of the bag. Xander watched in disgust as the blood dripped down Spike's chin as he drank half of it down in one gulp.

Then Spike's body did the most beautiful thing. In the semi-dark room, Xander was able to see the veins under the vampire's skin start to glow an almost neon blue. The new color pulsed a few times and the lines seemed to grow thicker with each beat. The brightness faded after a moment and the veins contracted to their previous state.

Wow. Vampire restoration in action. Spike was staring down at the container of blood in his hands. The vampire smiled slightly and let out a small laugh.

"Fill me in on the joke," Xander requested.

"Well, it's a pretty sight, isn't it? I'm achy and broody and drinking pig's blood. Just give me an excessive amount of hair gel and a Slayer to shag, and I'm bloody Angel."

Xander laughed with him. "Well, can't do anything about the Slayer part, but here-" He removed a plastic tube from his jacket pocket and tossed it into the vampire's lap. Spike picked it up and read the label. Vital Sassoon Sleek Straightening Balm. He looked back at Xander with

a raised eyebrow.

“Don’t know if it’s your brand, but...well, your hair’s a mess.”

Part Six

“All I’m saying is that it’s not the same.”

“But, why? You need to explain.”

“Bloody hell. Why? What’s so important?”

“Cause, I’m the one providing you with this oh-so-disturbing nourishment, and if it’s not doing any good, then I need to know how to make it better.”

“The only way it’s going to be better is if you bring me an actual person.”

“Well, that’s never gonna happen.”

“Then what’s the point?”

“The point is...well, I’m just curious. I’m a curious cat. I’m a cat of the breed of curiosity. Just tell me.” Okay, at this point Xander was definitely whining. But if Spike was going to bitch and moan every time he came here with another batch of pig’s blood, then Xander wanted to know what the big difference was between that and human blood.

It had been two weeks since Xander had found Spike at the factory. Since then, he had been coming back almost every day with blood to replenish the vampire’s strength. And it seemed to be working. On the outside, Spike looked much better. He was still too thin, but he had regained muscle mass, and his skin was back to its normal pale white color and no longer translucent. Xander figured that there was still a lot more healing to do. He suspected that it had taken much longer than the one week after Angel was dust to cause that kind of malnutrition, but Xander knew better than to ask too much about it. Spike was still reeling from the loss of his precious (and freakish) Drusilla. He still talked about her, but only when telling stories of long ago, nothing recent.

Xander had made a habit of finding the time to come by after Scooby meetings or patrolling. The local butcher had gotten to know him by now, and wasn't it funny that he never asked about the odd order. He had a sneaking suspicion that the butcher was a demon of some kind, and reserving pig's blood for special orders was not as uncommon as Xander hoped.

He also enjoyed watching Spike heal. It was a fascinating process. And the talking was still good. Of course, conversation wasn't part of the deal. But Spike never really complained. Not about the talking part, anyway. No, the complaining was about the fact that he had resorted to having a human bring him blood. They both agreed that it was a fair deal, though. Xander would help Spike regain the strength he needed to continue healing, and Spike promised that as soon as he could walk again, he would leave Sunnydale, the country even.

The fairness of the deal didn't stop the endlessly complaining, though. If it wasn't about the pig's blood, then it was about the fact that Xander wouldn't bring him cigarettes or alcohol. Xander explained that he couldn't bring cigarettes because he was too young to buy them and he didn't know anybody who smoked. He said the same thing about the alcohol, too, but he figured

Spike had to laugh a little at the boy. He had made himself comfortable on the table like he normally did when Spike was about to tell a story about his past with Dru and Angelus and Darla. But he really didn't know what the big deal was. Human blood is better. It just is. But Harris was being so insistent. So Spike was trying to think of something to tell the whelp. It occurred to him that there must be some kind of real reason. He had just never thought about it before. So he just started talking, hoping that he could make some kind of sense that would satisfy the boy-cat's curiosity.

"It tastes different."

"Well, duh! Explain the taste."

"Explain the taste. Okay. Pig's blood is mostly salt. It has kind of a dull sweetness to it as well."

"Yeah, yeah. I know what pig's blood tastes like. Why is it different from human?"

"You know what pig's blood tastes like? You been sampling what you bring me?"

“No. I was possessed by a hyena once. I ate a pig. It was a thing.”

“Please tell me there’s a story there.”

“My story later. First this.”

“Fine. But to tell you what human blood is like, I have to start with pig. This helps that you know, though. Like I said, pig has a dull sweetness to it. Sweet like...somebody added sweetener to it. Like it’s fake. And it sits on your tongue. Coats the inside of your mouth and throat like glue. Doesn’t go down right. And too salty. Human blood is salty, but it’s not...too much. Human has just the right amount of salt. The salt complements it. Doesn’t make it taste salty, just...spiced right.”

Hmm. This was ringing truer than Spike thought it would. Plus he found it easy to talk about blood when he could hear it pumping so gracefully through his boy’s body. He let the music penetrate him while he continued to talk. Bump-bump-pause-bump-bump.

“Not spice like Thai food spice. But spice like a perfectly seasoned mulled wine. And sweet.” Spike felt his mouth start to water. “Sweet like strawberries. Like

watermelon. Like...chocolate.”

Xander’s eyes widened at that and he licked his lips. Spike heard the kid’s heart race for a few beats before it slowed back down to its comforting bump-bump-pause-bump-bump-pause.

“Yeah. Chocolate. Sticky sweet milk chocolate. But good sticky. Melted chocolate. And warm. Blood that comes directly from a human’s veins pumps hot into a vampire and keeps pumping until the entire body is warm like California summer nights. And that warmth gives a vampire adrenaline. Energy that can make a vamp feel alive. Energy that will leave me bouncing off the walls for days.

“Human blood is what makes a vampire a vampire. Don’t know how Angel survived without it. It’s why we heal so fast. In fact, I’m sure it’s why I’m not out of this bloody chair yet. Dru brought me a few humans at first, but I think she got bored, so after a couple weeks she would just pick up a stray dog on the way home. Ever eat a dog? Not good. They’re practically flavorless with no sweetness to them at all, and chewy like gum.” Spike shuttered.

“Then when Angelus showed up, he started to bring me leftover people, but it didn’t take him long to just forget about me. So when you found me a few weeks ago after Dru left...” Spike looked up at Harris and realized that the kid had never really pressed the issue of what had happened during that week, but he sure must have been curious, because the look on his face now was pure excitement barely concealed by concern.

“I hadn’t had anything to eat in weeks. A little over a month, I think. Of course, when you showed up, I had also been drinking for a week straight which quite possibly was eating up my insides.”

Harris tilted his head at Spike. “So the pig’s blood isn’t really helping with the healing?”

“No, it’s helping. Just not as fast as human would. It’s like craving chocolate cake, but only getting an apple.” Spike let the kid consider that for a moment, then rolled himself a few feet closer to the table. “So, if you happen to come by with a willing human some time...You know, a nice pretty young thing with a long white neck and pure virgin blood pumping through warm blue veins...” Spike was looking directly into the kid’s eyes and moving closer and closer to him with each word. “Or hey, how about

something a little more convenient...”

Just when he reached the table, Harris unfolded a leg and pressed it firmly onto Spike’s knee. The kid pushed hard and Spike let the chair propel him backwards a few yards before he grabbed the wheels again and stopped himself. He didn’t really expect that the boy would let him feed off him, but it was worth a try. Actually, what was worth it was listening to Harris’ heartbeat during the entire exchange. It didn’t speed up at all. Not once. Of course, Spike didn't really know how menacing he was coming across. But still, this kid was such an anomaly to Spike. He wondered what it would take to actually get his blood to start racing. What could speed that heartbeat up? Besides the mention of chocolate, that is. But, then again, this slow and steady beat was one of the things he liked about the boy.

ONE of the things? His mind suddenly screamed at him. *What else about this little boy could you possibly like?* But Spike knew that this voice in his head was just a small part of his demon that had not come to terms with the fact that he had made a friend. A human friend. *This is all kinds of wrong. God, listen to me - I’m starting to think like he talks.* Spike silenced the voice quickly and focused on Harris who had jumped down from the table and was

now leaning against one of the high-backed dining chairs.

“Why virgin blood?” This was an unexpected question. Spike figured Harris would be chastising him for suggesting a taste, but the kid just completely ignored it. Interesting.

“Virgin blood is thicker than non-pure. This is harder to describe because you can't compare it to actual food. There is no substitute. Innocence and purity have a taste. Have a distinct flavor. Not the kind that your taste buds pick up on. It's a feeling, like a...presence. When virgin blood flows through a vampire's veins it's like tiny little pin pricks all over the body, but from the inside. It's sharp, but in a good way. Like pain during sex. Virgin blood leaves a vampire with a drug high. Like all's right with the world and everybody should feel as good as you.

“And, God, it will make you horny. Regular blood does as well, but virgin...you have no idea. Virgin blood will go straight to where you want it most, and let me tell you, that was when it was great to have Dru around. When the two of us would feed off the same virgin, we wouldn't stop shagging for days. Sometimes we wouldn't kill it right away. We would take a virgin home and keep it alive just by drinking small amounts of blood at a time.

“One time we kept this young boy around for a couple of months like that. This was in Portugal. Sometime in the '30s. He was seventeen, eighteen years old, and he was a screamer. So scared. I was surprised he didn't die of a heart attack during that time. Every time we walked into the room where we kept him chained, his heart would race so fast that I thought it was going to explode. We would get such a rush of blood when we bit into him that we didn't even have to suck. It just flowed straight down our throats so fast and got us so hot and bothered so quickly, that we would shag right there in front him. And his heart would never slow down. So fast, all the time. And he never stopped screaming. From the moment we walked into the room until we left. The screaming, the blood rush. It was intoxicating.”

“Uh, Spike?” Spike opened his eyes, not remembering when he had closed them, and looked at Harris. The boy was looking uncomfortable and bouncing slightly on his toes.

“What? Was that story a little too much for you?”

“No. It's just...well...will you stop that please?”

Spike noticed where the boy was looking and glanced down at his own lap. Much to his surprise, he discovered that at some point he had gotten quite hard and was stroking himself over his jeans. He stopped moving immediately, but left his hand where it was. Felt good. It had been awhile. He looked back at Harris and smirked. Then let out a little laugh.

“I guess that story was a little too much for *me*.”

“Yeah, that’s gonna be my cue to go. Looks like you need some alone with...yourself.” Harris started toward the door.

“Well, what do you expect, kid? You get me talking about human blood and virgins, but you refuse to bring me any. And there you are, all the time, with exactly what I crave pumping slowly through your veins, day in and day out.” The kid stopped and turned to look at him. Spike started rubbing the growing bulge in his jeans again. “And all I can do is sit here and listen to that pumping and you’re just there - taunting me, teasing me.”

“I don’t mean to.”

“I know you don’t, kid. Can’t stop your blood from

pumping.”

“Does it bother you? My being here?”

“Didn't say that, did I? I like you here. You really leaving now?”

“I'm not staying while you do that.”

“Fair enough. Don't think I can stop at this point. Will you be back tomorrow? I have something to show you.”

“What?”

“A surprise.”

“That's a little disturbing.”

“I think you'll like it.”

Harris turned his head away from the vampire again and sighed. “Okay. I'll be by after Scooby research.” He continued toward the door when Spike unzipped his jeans to allow for skin on skin contact.

Perhaps to let Spike know that the public masturbation

didn't bother him as much as he initially let on, the kid stopped at the door and joked, "Think I'll stop off and get some chocolate cake on the way home. Would you like me to bring you back an apple?"

That made Spike grin. "Wanker," he called after the boy as he opened the door and walked out.

Vampire hearing let Spike pick up Harris' quiet response as he shut the door behind him, "No, Spike, that would be you."

Part Seven

Xander was practically skipping toward the factory the following night. This had been a great day. Great day! And getting a C+ on a chemistry test was actually the least exciting part of it. Everything else was even better!

His mother had been home when he woke up that morning and she had made him waffles for breakfast. Xander couldn't remember the last time his mom had made breakfast. Then he answered a question about Hemingway correctly when he was unexpectedly called on in English class, and Willow had turned around and flashed a smile at him that caused a tremendous feeling of pride to flow through him. Then he was the one who

found the information about the new demon in town during the Scooby research party after school, which allowed Buffy to know, not only where to find it, but how to kill it. Great day!

And that wasn't even the best part! He couldn't wait to tell Spike. He reached the factory quicker than usual, and it wasn't until he was at the door that he realized he had forgotten to go by the butcher. Well, maybe there was still some leftover blood from yesterday. The vampire didn't always drink everything in one day. He slid open the factory door and ran in, excited to tell Spike what was going on.

“Spike! Guess what happened...”

But the vampire wasn't in the main room. This was supposed to be where he was sitting when Xander came by. Most of the time reading a book, or sometimes just staring into space, but he was always here. Xander turned toward Spike's bedroom. Just then he got the surprise that he figured Spike had been talking about yesterday.

Spike came walking toward Xander out of the bedroom. Walking. Actually more like sauntering. He had his

thumbs hooked into the belt loops of his jeans and he was moving just as slowly and casually as he had before the chair. Like absolutely nothing had happened. He stopped about two feet in front of Xander and held his arms out from his sides as if to say 'check me out!'

"Spike! You're...you're...wow!"

"Do you like the surprise?"

"Good surprise! High marks!" Xander squashed the disturbing urge to close the small gap between them and hug the standing man. "How long?"

Spike put his arms down and crossed the room to the table to lean on a chair. "Couple of days, now. Once I was able to stand up without shaking, the rest came pretty quickly."

"This is really great. I'm shocked and amazed. And impressed. So...this means you're back to normal, right?"

"Suppose so."

"Great! That means you can leave the factory. Get yourself some cigarettes and...blood. You can hunt and

feed again. That's just...great."

Spike took three big steps toward Xander and stood a few inches from his face. "Yeah. That's what it means. But that's not the deal, is it?"

"So, you're leaving, then? We made a deal. I help get you better, then you leave."

"That's the arrangement. What's the matter, kid? Gonna miss me?"

Xander backed a couple of steps away from the vampire. "Well...kinda got used to you being around."

An odd silence fell between them. Xander couldn't remember a time when they had nothing to say to one another. They were always talking.

Spike walked back to the table and sat on the edge. "Was there something you wanted to tell me? You were about to say something when you came in."

Thankful for the distraction, Xander perked up when he remembered his own news. "Oh! Yeah! Hey! You'll never believe it - Cordelia and I are back together!"

Spike hadn't thought about that, either. He had actually been pretty excited to show Harris that he could walk again. It had been a hard secret to keep. He had waited until he was no longer off balance and everything was back to normal. He had completely forgotten that things were now...back to normal. So, where was he going to go? Where was there *to* go?

"Well, I could go back to England. It's been a couple decades. Might be good to see the Mother Country again. I don't know, really."

"How about South America?"

"What?"

"South America. Isn't that where Drusilla said she was going? To see the jungles? If Cordy and I can get back together, that must mean there's hope for you two."

Dru. Now that was a thought. "Not sure she really wants me. She fell apart after you killed Angelus." Spike found himself remembering that night. He had hoped that the week's worth of alcohol had eradicated the memory, but he realized it had just buried it for a while. And now, here

it was - resurrected. "When word got back to us...she shrieked. Literally. Like a banshee, she was. I tried to comfort her, but she ran from me and locked herself in the room they shared upstairs. She didn't stop shrieking for hours. When she finally came downstairs, she told our last minion to pack up her things. She took him and my car and never said a word to me. Not one word. She just left. I don't really know if she went to South America."

Xander had moved to lean against a pillar in the center of the room. Spike looked up at him and listened to his heartbeat. The time he'd spent with the kid this past month had been the most civilized he had ever been in 120 years. He had a vague memory of this kind of sane calmness when he was human. It was terribly wrong for a vampire to be this much in touch with his human side, so perhaps South America and Dru were good ideas. Get himself back in the vamp game.

But this heartbeat. And this boy. An actual friend. He'd grown accustomed to him. Looked forward to his visits. Liked telling him stories and even hearing the kid's. There was so much more to tell and hear. That hyena story, for one. Would love to find out what that was all about. But if he stayed, then he could never feed. He had promised

the boy.

There had to be some way. Some way to be a vampire and still keep this heartbeat near him. Spike could kidnap Harris. That was an option. But, then he would have the boy but not the heartbeat. Not the same kind of heartbeat. Kidnapping would scare him too much, Spike was sure of it. And fright meant fast beating pulse. If he wanted a fast beating pulse, he could get that from anyone. This boy was special. Wasn't scared.

"You okay?" Harris asked after Spike's eyes had glazed over with thought.

"Shh," Spike was trying to figure this out and wanted to concentrate on the heartbeat quietly for a while longer. It occurred to him that this was probably the last time he would hear it. He really had no choice. Couldn't find a way. If he stayed, he would have to start eating again. That would upset the kid, and he would stop coming around. Probably get dusted by the Slayer, too. Bump-bump, pause, bump-bump, pause. He was really going to miss that.

Miss this boy, too, he had to admit. Spike couldn't keep the heartbeat, but maybe, just maybe...

Spike focused his eyes onto Harris. "Gonna miss you."

Xander's eyes widened slightly at that. "Yeah. Me, too. So you'll give South America a try? Maybe you can...write me? Tell me how you are. If you found Drusilla."

"Yeah. I could do that. Have you ever considered...coming with me?"

"What?"

"You know, get out of Sunnyhell. I could show you."

"Show me what?"

"The world." At that, the kid's heart started to race. "What's the matter?"

"You wanna turn me, don't you?" The question was panic-stricken. Harris had pressed himself further back into the iron pillar and had an honest-to-god look of fear on his face.

"Hey, no!" Spike crossed the room instantly and grasped the boy's shoulders lightly. "No. Not what I was saying.

Calm down.” The heartbeat continued to race. “Listen to me, Harris. Calm down.” It wasn’t helping. The heart continued to beat fast. Spike was not liking this. This was not the boy he knew.

“Xander...,” he choked out hoarsely, placing his left hand gently on the boy’s chest. “Listen to me. You have to calm down. Do you feel this? Your heart. Do you feel your heart?” Xander nodded looking directly into Spike’s eyes. “This is why I won’t turn you. Your heartbeat. I like when it’s slow. It’s usually slow. Make it slow again. Can you do that, mate? Calm down for me.”

Xander took a deep breath. He continued to stare sharply into Spike’s eyes and apparently found what he was looking for. The heartbeat started to slow down. A relative calmness spread across the boy’s face and soon the pulse was back to its usual bump-bump, pause, bump-bump, pause.

Spike smiled and kept his palm resting on Xander’s chest. This was good. For the first time he was actually able to feel it. He closed his eyes and let the sensation of touch and sound fill his body. It was so quiet in the factory. Just Spike and this heartbeat. He created a fantasy in which he could pull that beautiful heartbeat from the boy’s

body into his own. The thumping of Xander's heart pulsated against Spike's fingertips and palm and he wanted more. So much more.

Spike slid his right hand across the boy's shoulder until his thumb was resting on the jugular. Miraculously, Xander kept his pulse steady. He opened his eyes and saw the kid was still staring at him with that same calmness. Never had a human trusted him so much.

"S'why I like you, Xander. This heartbeat. I hear it all the time. As soon as you're close to me. I've been drowning in it for weeks. Won't you come with me? Wanna keep you close. Safe. Wanna protect this heart." Spike was suddenly getting very aroused. *Okay, where is this coming from?* He moved his lower half away from the boy slightly. This was not the message he was trying to get across. It wasn't about sex, and he didn't want Xander thinking that and getting scared again. "Come with me."

Xander slowly raised his hand and rested it lightly on Spike's neck, in the same place Spike had his hand on Xander's. "No," he answered. And it was a final, definite no. A no-arguments no. A no-more-heartbeat no.

Spike felt a kind of sad emptiness sweep through him. He was tired of losing the things that made him happy. He lost his human love. He lost his mother. He lost his poetry. He lost Angelus a century ago. He lost Drusilla. And now, this heartbeat. *This boy. NO! Not the boy. I won't lose the boy.*

The feeling of loss must have showed on his face because Xander said, "Don't be sad. It doesn't look good on you. Doesn't look right."

Spike laughed a little. "Yeah. Gonna miss you." Xander dropped his hand, seemingly expecting Spike to do the same, but he wasn't ready yet. Still wanted more. Needed more.

"Hey, Spike. Wanna back away from me, now? This is getting a little weird."

Spike pressed his hand more firmly into Xander's chest. "No. Want to feel this more. Let me? A little longer?"

The kid gave him a skeptical look. "You're wiggin' me out, here."

"Not meaning to. Leaving soon, and I want to remember

this. This heartbeat.“

“I don’t understand. Will you explain?”

“Tired of explaining. Just let me feel. Okay?”

“...Okay.”

Spike closed his eyes again. If it was over, really over, he had to take something with him. Make it part of him. He opened his eyes and smiled at Xander. “Can I have a taste?”

“A what?”

“Taste. Ya know, one for road.”

“Ew. No.”

“Promise I won’t have any human blood ‘til I’m out of the country. But give me a little something to sustain me. You know it’s been weeks.”

“No.”

“Gonna make me beg, Xander? Don’t have to ask, ya

know. Could take it right now if I wanted.” The boy’s pulse started to speed up a little. Spike moved his right hand from Xander’s neck to his cheek. He stroked the boy’s skin slowly with the back of his hand. “Shh. Stay calm. Not gonna, though. Want your permission.” Xander was able to slow his heartbeat back down quickly.

“You’re not gonna get it.”

“Ya know...I think I am. Know why? I think you want me to. Bite you. You want to know what it’s like. You’ve been studying vamps for a long time now. You keep asking me questions about my past. Want my stories. Want to know about blood. Just one little bite. For you - so you’ll know. For me - for strength, and memory.” Xander was looking at him thoughtfully.

“W-will it hurt?” he asked quietly.

“Not if I don’t want it to. A small bite. A little blood. Virgin blood, right?” Xander nodded slowly.

Spike moved his hand from Xander’s cheek, down his left arm and held the boy’s forearm tightly. “That a yes? To everything? A little taste before I go?” Xander licked his lips. Spike knew the answer before the kid said it, and he

got even harder with anticipation.

“Yes,” came through Xander’s lips so softly that Spike wouldn’t have heard it if he weren’t a vampire.

This was too good. The chance to drink slowly from a warm body. To feel that calm beautiful heartbeat pump into his veins. He wanted this right now more than anything he could remember.

“Promise me something?” Spike asked into warm brown eyes. Xander nodded. “Promise you won’t get scared. Not gonna hurt you, so no reason to get scared, right? Just stay calm, okay?”

“Yeah. Okay.”

Spike broke the stare that they had shared for the past several minutes. He let his eyes fall to the pulse point that his thumb had been resting on. Joyfully, he watched the kid tilt his head to his right slightly to give better access. *Good boy. That’s what I want.* Spike moved the hand that had been resting on Xander’s chest down to grab the other forearm. An instinctual move to immobilize the victim. *No victim here. Willing. Offering. Want. Take. Have. Good.* Still, though, Spike kept his

hands firmly on the boy's arms. Just in case.

He leaned down slowly and put his closed mouth on Xander's neck. The feel of the pulse on his lips was exhilarating. Spike ran his tongue across his own lips which moistened the skin on the boy, as well. Xander gasped briefly, but the pulse didn't quicken at all. So much control his boy had. *This is just so good.*

"Good," Spike growled as he let his demon come out. He ran his fangs along Xander's vein and felt the boy shiver beneath him. But still the slow and steady bump-bump, pause, bump-bump.

He opened his mouth a little wider and pushed into Xander's skin. A small 'pop' signified entry, and the blood started flowing down Spike's throat immediately. The boy's pulse quickened slightly for a few beats then slowed back down. When the blood was back to its normal rhythm, Spike had to suck hard to get it to flow out of Xander. He took his time, though. Didn't pull out more than each beat offered.

Then pin pricks, little pin pricks. Throughout his entire body. And warmth and heat and heartbeat. That glorious temporary heartbeat.

good! So not good. But feels good. Feels so good. I could do this for a while. Just a little while longer. Good...

Xander allowed no thought to enter his brain. Spike was making disturbing sucking noises, but other than that, there was no sound in the factory at all. The world was still. For a little while...

Okay. Wait. Too long. Too long! Getting colder now. This isn't right. None of this is right.

“Wait.” No response from Spike. “Wait. No - wait - wait. Stop.” Xander felt the vampire grip tighter on his forearms. Really tight. Dad-bruise tight.

“Spike! Enough - stop now!” Still no change. Xander was getting scared. But Spike told him not to get scared. This wasn't right, though. *Not good, not good, not right. This is more than a taste. Scared now. Really, really, scared!*

But he could feel his heartbeat wasn't speeding up. He tried to make it go faster. *Spike doesn't like my fast heartbeat. Go faster and he'll stop.* But it wouldn't go faster. Just wouldn't. *Oh, god. I'm losing too much blood. Not enough in me. Getting even slower now, isn't it? Oh, god.*

“Stop. Please, stop. Please. Spike, please, stop.” Xander tried to move. He tried to push his arms forward. He tried to twist his body down and away from Spike’s fangs. He tried, he really tried. Was it Spike’s strength? Or was he just too weak, now? Was he really trying hard enough? *Too strong. Too weak. Oh, god. Wait.*

Xander felt his legs start to shake. *Not strong enough. No. Not ready. Not strong enough.* He could feel the blood leaving his body now. Could feel each strong pull from Spike’s mouth. He was so cold. The rest of his body joined his legs in shaking. Spike’s mouth was so warm. Xander involuntarily pushed his body up toward the vampire’s mouth to get some of the warmth back. Spike moaned.

“Cold. Help me, Spike. I’m so cold.” Xander began sliding down the pillar. He thought he was falling. But it was too slow. He was being pulled. Pulled down. Then he was sitting on the floor and Spike was sitting in front of him. Fangs still buried deep into his flesh. Strong hands still held too tightly onto his forearms. Xander wanted to cry. He made a small effort to find the Mean-Xander buried deep within him, but it chose this time to not make itself available.

“Please. Stop. So cold. Spike. Help me.” *Okay. This is silly. I’m on the floor. I think I should leave now. It’s time to go.* “Think I’ll go home now.” Xander’s head fell backward and hit the iron pillar. “Ow.” He felt the grip on his arms lighten. “Can I go home now?”

The pulling was less now. Spike was still warm. The strong hands left his arms. Xander blindly reached up and rested a hand on the vampire’s chest. He felt a beat. Two beats.

Xander let out a gasp when Spike took his teeth out of his neck. He stayed still for a few moments. Two more beats from Spike’s chest. He lifted his head off the pillar and looked at the man’s face in front of him. Smooth sharp features. Blue eyes. Blood on the mouth. *My blood.*

“Wanna go home, now, Xander?” Spike asked softly.

“Yes, please.”

“Okay.”

Neither moved. A beat from Spike’s chest.

“That’s not fair,” Xander tried to focus on the vampire's blue eyes. “Not fair.”

“What’s not fair?”

“You stole my heartbeat.”

Spike smiled. Xander saw blood coating the vampire’s teeth. *My blood.*

“Not for long,” Spike brought a hand up and covered the one sitting on his chest.

“I thought -” Xander took in a sharp breath and Spike wrapped his fingers around the hand his was covering. “I thought we were friends.”

“We are.”

“I really hate you.”

“Not for long.”

“Did you get what you wanted?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“I really hate you.”

“I know.”

“Not supposed -” another two quick sharp breaths and Xander started shivering again. This time Spike shuffled closer to him and wrapped an arm around his slightly shaking shoulders. His other hand still held Xander’s against the vampire’s chest.

“That better?” Spike asked.

Xander nodded. “You’re warm.” The shivering lessened. *My blood. My blood made him warm.* “Not supposed to go like this. I’m one of the good guys.”

“Not for long.”

“Can I go home, now?”

“Yeah. Close your eyes.”

Xander gazed at Spike and marveled at the blue eyes sparkling with life. “I don’t trust you.”

“No reason you should, mate. Close your eyes.”

Xander was tired. He closed his eyes. *I'll go home and this won't be happening anymore. My blankets will keep me warm and this isn't happening anymore.* He felt Spike let go of his hand. *Time to go. Go home now.*

Another 'pop' sound. Then something was against his mouth. An arm? A wrist. And it was wet. And it was warm. *Good...* Xander parted his lips. And it was wet. And it was warm. Soon there was nothing.

The End