

Long Time Gone

by
Yin Again

Part One

Xander Harris looked down at the two platinum bands on his left ring finger. He wound them around and around his finger unconsciously. The sun was setting, and he really needed to get out of the car. He gave the rings a final twist and then settled them into the slight groove they had formed in his skin. He clutched both hands on the steering wheel and looked straight ahead.

His car was sitting in the driveway of a large, beautifully restored Victorian house located in a residential section of Sunnydale, California. The house was white with dark gray trim, and a black wrought-iron fence surrounded it. The ornate gate was directly in front of his bumper. Inside the gate was an immaculately landscaped yard. A short path led up to the house's front porch, which held several wicker rocking chairs.

Xander stepped out of his car and into the gathering twilight. He walked to the gate and gave it an experimental push. It opened silently, and he stepped through it, his fingers lingering for a moment on the letter "S" that was worked into the gate's design. He walked up the path and climbed the steps. He trailed

his fingers over the back of one of the rocking chairs and hesitated, looking at the door before him. He drew in a deep breath and let it out in a long, controlled exhalation. He touched the two rings on his left hand lightly with his right index finger, and then raised his right hand to knock on the door. Before he could touch it, the door opened silently, and Xander found himself pinned by the direct gaze of two icy blue eyes.

“What do you want?” the voice was a low growl, and Xander caught himself before he could step back reflexively. His brown eyes met the steely blue ones.

“Spike. It’s me. Xander.” He waited.

Xander was completely unprepared to see the spark of – was it joy? Happiness? – that flared in the other man’s eyes. Then a long, pale hand snaked out of the house and snatched him inside.

Xander was startled by his quick entry into the house. He was even more startled when Spike immediately started looking him over, even touching his shoulder to turn him around. After finishing the inspection, Spike’s eyes met Xander’s again, and Xander noted that the shuttered look he remembered so well was back, and he missed that little spark he had seen before. Xander couldn’t help but grin at the vampire before him. Spike looked almost exactly the same. His hair was still white-blond and gelled into submission, his scarred eyebrow raised in a “typical Spike” sardonic expression. The two men looked at each other for a moment, then both burst out laughing as they realized they were dressed almost exactly the same. They were both wearing black jeans and black tee shirts, though

Xander had on black tennis shoes and Spike's feet were bare. They laughed easily together for a moment. The moment passed, and Xander knew he needed to try to talk past the lump that had suddenly appeared in his throat. He was just getting ready to try and force words out when Spike spoke.

"You want a beer?"

Xander nodded gratefully and followed the blond man as he turned to go further into the house. As he followed Spike, Xander looked around the house curiously. Despite its fussy exterior, the inside of the house was comfortably decorated. The layout was open, with large, airy rooms. The large living room was painted in several shades of taupe and brown, and the furniture arrayed in front of the fireplace looked very comfortable. He noticed a small door under the sweeping staircase and assumed it concealed a bathroom. On the way to the kitchen they passed a large dining room; Xander got the impression of big, dark furniture and the glint of a crystal chandelier.

The kitchen itself proved to be a revelation. It looked like it had been transported from the set of a show on the Food Network. The appliances were all stainless steel, and a huge pot rack, overflowing with polished copper pans, hung above a butcher-block island. The kitchen also had a fireplace, which was fronted by two leather club chairs and a low table. Spike waved Xander to one of the chairs and walked to the fridge.

Xander sank into the soft chair and relaxed for the first time in days. Spike wasn't going to question him or make him talk until he was ready. The feeling that

washed over him at this easy acceptance very nearly brought tears to his eyes. He looked down at his hands and twisted the two rings for a moment until he regained his composure. Xander heard the sound of a bottle cap being popped and looked up. Spike stepped in front of him and handed him an icy bottle.

"Thanks."

Spike nodded and slipped into the other leather chair and took a sip of his own beer. His blue eyes watched Xander expectantly with an unreadable expression.

"It's ... it's good to see you, Spike." Xander stammered a little as he spoke. "How have you been?"

Spike hesitated, and then spoke quietly, "It's to be small talk, then?" His mouth quirked at Xander in a small grin. "Well, why not?" He took a long pull of his beer and then turned again to his guest. "Who do you want to know about? Willow, Dawn, Angel, Buffy, Clem, the Watcher, Demon girl?"

"You."

Blue eyes searched brown in the ensuing silence. Spike drained his beer and set the bottle on the table in front of him. "Me. Oooooookay. Well, I have a house." He gestured to the room around them. "I live here. I'm still the new and improved 'all soul - no chip' Spike that I was when you left." He hesitated and looked at the human for a long moment. "Funny thing, that. 'Til I had a soul I didn't have a good grasp on the concept of guilt. But, I figured it out well enough to make Angel pony up part of that big pile of cash he's been sitting

on for a century or so. That takes care of the blood money, and lets me annoy Angel pretty frequently.” The two men shared a smile; Spike well remembered Xander’s animosity toward his grand-sire.

Xander nodded. “Still fighting the good fight?”

Spike nodded ruefully. “Y’know, Buffy moved to LA with Angel a few years ago? Dawn’s still here – she runs all the little Slayer-wannabes, well, the ones who survived. Buffy rotates them in and out to various places to keep the peace. Dawn’s sort of the Hellmouth logistics department. They call me out when they get into something particularly nasty. It keeps the killer in me happy. You keep up with anyone?”

Xander looked down at his hands, not surprised to find himself twirling the rings unconsciously. “No, not really. Until recently, it was a clean break. I talked to Willow for the first time in eight years about three days ago.” He lapsed into silence. “Spike, are Buffy and Dawn happy?”

Spike fingered the bottle in front of him, tearing at the label. “They are”, he said in a measured tone. “Well, Buffy’s with the Poof, so it’s changeable from minute to minute. But, yeah, she’s happy. Little Bit – she’s great.” Spike smiled broadly, the smile even reaching his eyes. “She married a nice guy five years ago – he’s a local, so he knew the score. They have a little girl who’s 2. I call her the Littlest Bit. Her real name’s Sara.” Spike smiled to himself, and then looked back up at Xander. The smile dropped off of his face as he saw tears fill stricken brown eyes, just before Xander jumped out of his chair and fled the room.

Part Two

Spike sank back into his chair with a sigh. Brilliant, he chastised himself, so much for the small talk, wanker. He couldn't quite wrap his head around Xander-fucking-Harris showing up on his doorstep after eight years. He laughed at himself for still being able to feel surprise after a hundred and thirty-odd years. Though he really was surprised. The man who had stood before him was only Xander in name. Almost every trace of the boy he had been was gone. Spike had truly not recognized him as he stood in his doorway. Xander's face was thinner and much more angular, and his eyes were almost dead. The boy he remembered had eyes that snapped and sparked with humor and life – this man had eyes full of pain. This man also had much better fashion sense. Spike smiled as he remembered their shared laugh over the matching wardrobes. The body had been very different, too. The Xander who had left town had been beefy, this man was whipcord strong, and didn't appear to have an ounce of extra fat on him anywhere.

Spike thought back to the feeling that had washed over him when Xander had said he wanted to know about him before all the others. He knew that feeling. The demon had roared in triumph, just before Spike had brought it back to heel. In the years since the gift of his soul Spike had worked hard to reconcile the soul and the demon, to keep them in balance as best he

could. Most of the time, he felt like a single entity, but on occasion, the demon part pushed itself to the forefront. In a fight or whenever someone threatened those he loved, the demon would wrest control and tell the soul to sod off for a bit. Eventually, the balance would return, along with Spike's iron control. Spike had forgotten, or repressed, the way his demon part felt about the boy. With Xander gone for so long, it just hadn't come up – and the demon wasn't the broody type. But one sniff of that scent unique to the boy, the smell of cinnamon and sunshine, and Spike had felt the demon stir. That little bit of extra attention had made it roar.

Spike grabbed the empty beer bottle and carried it to the trashcan. He knew the sun was fully down now, so he opened the heavy blinds on the kitchen window. The streetlights had come on, and the world looked peaceful. He could see the dark sedan in his driveway, so he knew Xander hadn't left. He decided to fall back on old habits. The Xander of old had been an eating machine, so maybe some dinner would restore equilibrium. Spike opened another beer for himself and started pulling ingredients out of the huge refrigerator.

Xander stared at himself in the mirror. He had found the small bathroom under the staircase and had managed to wrestle his emotions into submission before he could give in to the urge to collapse on the floor and cry like a brokenhearted child. He ran some cold water in the sink and splashed his face. As his hands rubbed over the stubble, he realized that he must look like shit. He looked into the mirror again, this time actually seeing himself. Yes, he looked like shit. His hair was ruffled, his face was drawn and

unshaven, and he had enormous dark circles under his eyes. No wonder Spike hadn't recognized him. He dried his face on the plain white towel and left the bathroom. As he entered the living room, he realized that Spike had stayed in the kitchen to give him some space. Feeling edgy and out of sorts, he stripped off his shoes and socks and sank down to the floor in a cross-legged position, resting his hands on his knees.

Xander closed his eyes and fell into the familiar meditative breathing pattern. His five years of martial arts training allowed him to achieve a meditative state within three deep breaths. His mind quieted as he began a familiar exercise. Xander inhaled, drawing air into his lungs at a slow pace. He measured the breath by his heartbeat, pulling air in for six beats, releasing it for six beats. He felt the air flow in through his nose, fill his lungs, expand his diaphragm and settle in his abdomen. Without holding the breath, he began releasing it, the air flowing up, reversing its path and exiting his mouth. He could feel his whole body relax as he established the pattern. The only sound he could hear was his own breathing.

After a few minutes, he began the second part of the exercise. He concentrated on the inside of the center of his forehead and began gathering his chi, or life force. It was like gathering a small ball of light and heat to the specific point he had chosen. It felt like small sparks of electricity running up his limbs, converging on the spot. His breathing never faltered and his posture never changed. He envisioned the energy as a small, strong yellow glow and held it at his forehead for a cycle of breaths.

Once he had it stable, he started to move the ball of chi down to the center of his chest. He imagined that it left a warm path as it passed down the center of his body. He centered the ball at his chest and held it steady. After another breathing cycle, he moved it again. This time he forced the ball lower, to his lower abdomen and the point called the dan tien. This was more difficult, and his perception of the ball wavered slightly as he moved it. Eventually, he got it centered. He felt his control slipping, so he released the ball, allowing it to move back to his chest and then to his forehead. Once it reached its origin point, he allowed it to dissipate, letting the energy flow back into his limbs and the rest of his body. He took one last measured breath and let it out. He let his head hang low against his chest for a moment and took a regular breath. He smelled the smell that was uniquely Spike. It permeated the house. The smell was like rain and smoke, and Xander had always associated both of those scents with Spike. He sniffed experimentally. He also smelled food: something spicy and rich.

Xander lifted his head and opened his eyes to find Spike crouched in front of him several feet away. Spike was staring at him with a completely gob smacked look on his face. Xander smiled at him, and the blond man relaxed slightly. His wary crouch settled into a more casual sitting posture on the floor, and he rested his elbow on his knee and dropped his sharp chin into his upturned palm. The scarred eyebrow rose. "What was that?" he asked. "Magic?"

Xander shook his head. "No, not magic. Chi Kung. It's a martial arts thing – manipulating your life force. It helps me get a grip when I've freaked out and made an

ass of myself.”

“I could feel it from the kitchen.” Spike spoke quietly.

“You could feel that I made an ass of myself from the kitchen?” Xander grinned.

“No, you git. I could feel the energy, the force or whatever. Supernatural, here – y’know.” He gestured toward his own chest. “It felt like being in the house when the girls were casting, back in the old days. Like magic.” His voice held something like wonder.

“I’m surprised you don’t know about Chi Kung – you were always busting out the Kung Fu on the Sunnydale demon squads.” Xander rose lightly to his feet and held a hand out to the vampire. The hand was accepted and he easily tugged the smaller man to his feet. They stood face to face for a moment. Xander dropped the hand he was still holding and broke the eye contact.

Spike took a short step back, out of the human’s personal space. “Nope – never much cared about the non-ass kicking martial arts. Besides, no life – no chi.”

Xander nodded. “Makes sense. Do I smell food?”

The two men sat across the small wooden table from each other, enjoying their dinner. Xander was twirling a huge ball of pasta around a fork, and Spike watched in awe as he shoved the entire thing into his mouth and chewed. He pushed the open beer closer to Xander in preparation. Xander grabbed it and started trying to drink around the huge mouthful, also trying to say things like “Ow!” and “Hot!” Spike placed a smaller bite

in his own mouth and chewed to disguise his smirk. He looked up as a crumpled napkin bounced off his forehead. Xander was glaring at him.

Spike widened his eyes at his tablemate. "What?"

"You could have told me it had lava in it." Xander mock-huffed.

Spike snorted. "I told ya it was fra diavlo. What do you expect from the devil's pasta? Hugs and puppies?"

"I guess I wasn't paying attention. I was so taken aback by the Big Bad cooking." There was no heat in the comment, and Spike rather liked the teasing tone. He decided to play along.

"I have lots of hidden talents – cooking is merely the tip of the iceberg. I also knit and scrapbook." He said loftily.

Xander stared across the table, open-mouthed.

"I'm kidding, twit. What, d'ya think I turned into the undead Martha Stewart?"

"I thought Martha Stewart was the undead Martha Stewart." Xander deadpanned. They shared a smile and went back to eating. A few moments later Xander gestured to the mug of blood Spike was enjoying with his food.

"Still bagging it? He asked.

Spike grimaced slightly. "It's a soul thing. I did switch

to human, though. I've got a good connection in town. I get way better stuff than Angel, anyway." He laughed ruefully. "It's not very 'Big Bad', but it keeps me from having unnecessary conversations with myself."

Xander nodded. He wanted to ask more about the soul/demon relationship, but didn't want to do anything to change the light conversational tone. He looked up at Spike's quiet question.

"Do you have a place to stay while you're in town?"

Xander shook his head. "I guess I need to see to that pretty soon."

"No, you don't," Spike replied matter-of-factly. "I've got three extra bedrooms here, and you're welcome to stay as long as you choose." He held up a hand as Xander's mouth opened. "No arguments, whelp." Xander grinned at the old insult. He smiled at Spike and briefly laid his left hand on top of Spike's right as it rested on the table.

Spike smiled at the warmth and looked down at their hands ... and saw the rings.

Part Three

The demon roared. It roared a single word: MINE! Spike gripped the sides of the kitchen sink and fought the raging beast within. As soon as he'd seen the

platinum bands, one thick, and one thin, encircling Xander's tanned finger, the demon had shrieked. It had taken every bit of Spike's strength to smash the demon down and smile nicely at Xander. Still holding the demon tightly, he had cleared the dinner dishes and sent Xander out to the car for his belongings. Without releasing that desperate hold, he had shown the other man to the guest room at the head of the stairs and left him to get settled. He'd walked slowly out of the room and down the stairs and into the kitchen. Grabbing the sink, he had released his hold, and the demon sprang free. Spike had felt his face change into the demon visage, his fangs dropping and the ridges appearing on his forehead. The rational part of his brain decided to just let it go for a few minutes, so he tried only to keep the noise down as the beast raged. The rings – a claim! Someone had claimed his boy!

As soon as the rage started winding down, Spike slowly reasserted his control over the demon. He panted harshly as he mentally pushed the demon down, into the background, away. The beast went reluctantly, still wanting to howl out its rage. When Spike heard Xander's footsteps on the stairs he straightened up and shook his head to change his face back to normal. By the time Xander entered the kitchen, Spike was pulling two more beers out of the fridge. Turning, he held one out to Xander.

Xander took it gratefully and stood, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, nervously. Spike noticed that he'd changed out of his jeans and into a pair of soft cotton sleep pants that were a deep burgundy in color. He still wore his black tee shirt, and his long, tanned feet were still bare. Spike closed the distance

between them and laid a hand on the darker man's shoulder.

"Xan, you don't have to explain yourself to me, you know. You're welcome here." Blue and brown eyes met, and Spike saw relief flood Xander's expression.

"Thank you," Xander sighed. He held Spike's gaze. "I want to tell you the whole story, but I just don't think I can start it without finishing it. And I don't have the strength to even start it tonight."

Xander looked so miserable that Spike knew he had to give his friend – and yes, he thought to himself, this man is my friend – a break. He pushed the tense shoulder under his hand in a friendly gesture and asked, "Movie, bed, or go out and kill something?"

Xander's eyes lit up and then his expression hardened. "Kill something" he gritted out. "Definitely kill something."

"Well, OK then!" Spike's exultant shout caused Xander to start. Spike turned and pushed the other man toward the stairs. "Go get changed and I'll call Dawn and see where she needs a patrol tonight."

Xander hesitated. "Um, Spike It's all right if you tell Dawnie I'm here, but can we save the big reunion scene until tomorrow night? I'd really just like to kill something, take a shower and crash tonight, OK?"

Spike pushed him toward the stairs again and said, "You got it, mate," as he headed for the phone.

At 2:00 in the morning, the two men stumbled into the house, exhausted, happy and completely covered in thin, brown, sticky demon slime that smelled like a sewer. Every time they looked at one another they broke out into hysterics. Spike's hair was completely flat on one side and standing up in individual slime-coated, hardened strands on the other. Xander had taken a huge wad of slime to the back of the head, so his dark locks stood out around his face like a lion's mane.

Spike had led Xander around to the back of the house so they could enter through a conveniently placed laundry room. They stripped off their shoes, socks, jeans and tee shirts, throwing them directly into the washer. Spike started the machine and poured soap in, hoping that the demon slime wouldn't invade the appliance and make it reek forever. He handed Xander a towel and began mopping his own face with another. They leaned weakly against the washer side by side to catch their breath. Spike looked at Xander as the other man tried to rub demon slime out of his hair. His observations earlier had been correct. Xander had changed a lot. Every muscle in his arms stood out in sharp relief as he rubbed at his hair. His chest was sculptured, with flat pecs that led down to defined abs. The center of his chest was covered with an arrow of dark hair that trailed downward in a silky line. A pair of black boxer briefs rode low on his hips, exposing the hollows where the oblique muscles curved below their waistband. Spike tore his eyes away and mentally shook himself.

Wouldn't do to get caught staring at the boy like a starving wolf, now would it? He wondered if the demon was breaking through. As a vampire, Spike wasn't burdened with any human compunction about the gender, or even species, really, of those he found attractive. He just went with the feelings – he'd had both male and female lovers in the past. However, the Xander he'd previously known was fairly aggressively hetero, despite a one-time plea for Willow to "gay him up" so he'd stop attracting demon women. And the ring. If Spike wasn't mistaken, it was a wedding ring, and the soul was in no way willing to let the demon poach. Spike raised a towel to his own head and tried to remove some of the slime coating his hair.

Xander lowered his towel to work on cleaning off his arms, and took the opportunity to look at Spike. His body looked exactly the same. He still stood in pale perfection – his body was like a marble statue. Each muscle was as sculptured as Xander remembered, and his skin still had that beautiful, translucent sheen that invited a touch to see if it felt as smooth as it looked. Hesitantly, Xander ran his eyes down Spike's body. He remembered the vampire's proclivity for eschewing underwear, and wasn't sure if he was ready for the Naked Spike Experience. Thankfully, he noted that Spike was wearing a pair of white boxer briefs similar to his own, though they were skin-tight and didn't leave much to the imagination. Xander averted his eyes, feeling his face flush. He hoped the stink of the slime would cover the smell of the sharp stab of arousal he felt.

Xander admitted to himself that he had always admired Spike's body. After he had left the Hellmouth and

moved away, Xander had tried pretty much everything. He had found that there were several things he disliked: hard liquor, cocaine, homelessness, getting his ass kicked, and jobs that required either a hairnet or a nametag. Along the way, he had also found several things he did like: good beer, sushi, the occasional joint, a comfortable bed, a good job, computers, martial arts training, and both girls and boys. When he'd lived in Phoenix for a year he'd even had a stormy relationship with another man for a while. After that, he'd been able to recognize the feelings he'd always had about Spike. The feelings of attraction he'd felt for the blond vampire had been quickly sublimated into anger and sarcasm at the time, because he had been way too tight-assed to see what they really were.

Spike missed the faint smell of arousal coming from Xander, but he couldn't miss the huge surge of self-loathing, shock and despair that followed it. He dropped his towel and turned to face Xander, who was shaking like a leaf. Spike reached out to him, but stopped when he saw the other man flinch instinctively. He turned the reach into a gesture toward the door to the kitchen.

"There's a bathroom across from your room, if you want to get a shower. Towels are in there." Spike watched silently as Xander bolted for the door.

Xander stood under the pounding hot water and scrubbed his hair yet again. The demon slime had started to dissolve after the third application of shampoo, and the fifth round seemed to be the charm. Once he was completely clean, he allowed his thoughts to finally come to the surface. He thought about the

feelings that had overtaken him in the laundry room. He had been standing there thinking about Spike's body and how attractive it was. He'd felt aroused. And then he'd felt awful. How could he feel that way for someone, anyone? How could his mind and body betray Shari's memory like that? The threatening tears welled up in his eyes, and he ducked his head under the spray. He braced his arms on the walls of the shower and sobbed into the water pouring down his face.

Eventually, the storm passed, and his breathing returned to normal. This was not the first time he'd broken down since his wife's death, but it was the first time for this particular reason. He'd done the therapy, and he'd been warned that the first time he was attracted to anyone would be traumatic. He had totally convinced himself that it wouldn't be a problem – because he'd never be attracted to anyone new again, anyway. Well, he hadn't counted on the someone new being someone old. Sighing, he grabbed the soap and washed his face, grimacing at the feel of the prickly stubble.

The water had started to cool, so Xander stepped out of the shower and wrapped his body in another one of Spike's fluffy, white towels. He rummaged in the small leather kit he'd brought in earlier, and smiled when he came up with a razor.

Spike stood under the pounding hot water in his own shower and also completed the fifth shampooing of his hair. He scrubbed his body and then cocked his head to

listen. There it was; he'd been wondering how long Xander would last before the dam of emotions broke. He could hear the broken sobbing. He turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, figuring the least he could do was to try and allow the other man enough hot water to last until the end of his crying jag.

Padding naked into his bedroom, he slipped on a pair of black sweatpants and a cream-colored long-sleeved tee shirt. He ran a hand through his towel-dried hair and considered going back to the bathroom for hair gel. He decided against it and slipped out the door. He walked to the head of the stairs and paused in front of the bathroom door, placing his hand against the wooden surface. He could hear Xander's sobs tapering off. With a sharp nod, he continued downstairs to the kitchen.

By the time Xander entered the kitchen, Spike had the fire lit and a mug of hot chocolate waiting on the low table. The fire was the only light, and Spike was sitting far back in one of the club chairs, sipping from his own mug. Xander crouched in front of Spike's chair and looked directly into his friend's eyes. The blue eyes widened slightly as the vampire noticed that Xander had shaved. He stifled his immediate impulse to lay his hand flat on the sharp planes of the tanned, gaunt cheek. Xander spoke quietly.

"I know you've guessed that things are not right with me, Spike. I just want to say thank you for giving me the time and space that I need. Back ... home ...everyone wants me to talk about it endlessly, and I couldn't take it anymore." He paused, and Spike set his mug down on the table.

Xander stayed in his crouch and rested his forearm on the armrest of Spike's chair, enjoying the heat from the flames at his back. He closed his eyes briefly, and then opened them again, staring into Spike's eyes. He seemed to find something he needed there, and he nodded his head slightly and took a quick, shuddering breath.

"After the First went down, I was done with the good fight. I was exhausted and miserable, and I didn't really care if I lived or died. I was beyond worthless, because I was so messed up. The night I left, I didn't even tell anyone – not even Willow." He looked down at his hands, and Spike could see the remorse he felt. "I just left. I did call her later, and tell her I was going away for a while. She was so good about it; said she understood. I went, well, I went everywhere. I bounced around from place to place for a while. I worked a series of shitty jobs, got in a fair amount of trouble." He grinned at Spike, who returned the grin with a sardonic look. "About five years ago, I wound up in Atlanta. I put myself through tech school. I'm a professional computer geek now – isn't that funny? I followed in Willow's footsteps. I found a decent job and I made a few friends. I was in terrible shape physically, so I decided to take up martial arts." He paused, and closed his eyes again. "That was kind of because of you." His eyes opened and met Spike's again. Spike gave him a small smile.

"You always looked so cool when you were kicking the shit out of something – I wondered if I could do that. And you know what? I could." Xander's smile was brilliant. On his now thinner face, the smile looked different from the shy half-smiles Spike had seen on

him in years past. This smile was full of pride and confidence, and it made Spike take in an unneeded breath. "I never felt so good about myself, less like the Zeppo or the Doughnut-Boy. It was so incredible. I had found a new home, with people who only knew me as Xander, the guy with a good job and a nice place and a cool car who was a dedicated student – not the Slayer's pet or the demon magnet." He took another measured breath and let it out slowly.

"And that's when I met Shari." Spike could feel the pain as the name slipped past his lips. "She was an instructor, and she whipped my ass. I thought I knew how to fight, and she mopped up the floor with me every time. She was incredibly polite while she did it – she was always teaching. She was always learning, too. She wanted to know everything, whether it was about fighting, or philosophy or meditation or literature or food or wine or ... anything."

"I still can't believe she married me." Xander's voice dropped, and he lowered his head to his forearm, his other hand coming up to twist the two platinum bands. In a voice so low that Spike picked it up only by virtue of his vampire hearing he said, "I still can't believe she died."

Spike placed his hand on the back of Xander's neck and lowered his own forehead to rest against the top of the bowed head before him. As he heard Spike say softly, "Let it out, Xan," the younger man fell forward on his knees, buried his head in his friend's lap and cried like the world was ending.

Eventually, his emotions spent, Xander shifted to sit on the floor at Spike's feet. Spike passed him a napkin from the stack on the table. Xander wiped his eyes and blew his nose, still marveling at the kindness the vampire was showing him. Throughout the long bout of tears, Spike's hand had never left his hair, stroking him lightly. Spike's other hand had alternately patted his shoulder or rubbed soothing circles on his back, the vampire murmured comforting nonsense phrases all the while. Xander really didn't feel like getting up off the floor. He felt secure leaning against Spike's hard legs, with his cool hand gently carding through his hair while they both stared into the fire. There seemed to be no pressing need for either of them to move.

Xander was awakened by a shake to the shoulder and Spike's knees shifting slightly under him. He had fallen asleep and instinctively turned and nestled his head into the vampire's lap again, wrapping his arms around Spike's legs. Spike was afraid the hard floor and the demon fight were going to combine to cripple Xander by morning, or he would have gladly let the man remain asleep curled around his legs.

Xander groaned and shifted on the floor. Spike gently disengaged the strong arms holding his legs and pulled them both upright. Xander was no more than half awake as the smaller man walked him out of the kitchen and up the stairs. The dark, tousled head rested against the equally tousled blond one as they slowly moved through the house. Spike knew dawn was not far away. He walked his charge into the guest bedroom and pulled back the blankets. He sat Xander down on the bed and started manhandling him into a lying-down position. The larger man wouldn't

cooperate. He stopped Spike's ministrations with a warm hand on his arm. His bleary eyes opened slightly, and he crooked a finger to bring Spike closer. Xander's fingers closed on the curve his friend's jaw, and he brought their foreheads to rest against one another. They held the pose silently for a moment, and then Xander's finger traced Spike's jaw and then brushed his cheekbone. His lips opened and he whispered, "Thank you, Spike."

Spike collapsed in his own bed and let out the unneeded breath he'd been holding ever since Xander's warm fingers had touched his face. It had taken every ounce of control he possessed to break the boy's touch and put him to bed. He'd wanted desperately to climb in beside him and hold him while he slept.

Spike was tactile by nature – he craved physical affection. Dawn understood it, and tried to accommodate his need – as long as her husband didn't get too jealous. Spike and Dawn and Sara would curl up on the couch and watch movies, and Dawn would hold his hand anytime she wound up sitting next to him, but for Spike it wasn't really enough. He appreciated it, but longed for more. He had forgotten that Xander was much the same – drawing comfort from touching and being touched by others. Spike could remember several screaming fights Xander and Anya, the demon bitch, had had about Xander wanting to cuddle instead of supplying her with more orgasms.

Early on, Willow and Xander's friendship had included physical closeness, but after the incident where Spike had kidnapped them and they'd shared an illicit kiss, and been caught by their respective steadies, that part

of their relationship had ended. Spike found himself hoping that Xander's Shari had fulfilled that need for him. He puzzled a bit and realized that the demon wasn't howling about this woman. He thought about it some more and realized that, for the demon, the problem was resolved. Shari was dead, therefore another did not claim his boy, and therefore no problem existed. Spike envied the demon its simple outlook sometimes.

Rolling over in his big, empty bed, Spike brought to his nose the hand that had spent hours in Xander's hair that night. He fell asleep breathing in Xander's cinnamon and sunshine scent.

Part Four

Someone was tugging on his toes. Xander shook his foot to make the annoying contact stop, but it came right back. He drew his foot up and under the covers. As he slowly came awake, he realized that he was lying in a strange bed. It was a really nice strange bed, though. The linens were soft and warm, and he was wrapped in a fluffy down comforter. The room was very dim. He pulled the covers away from his head and finally opened his eyes to look up at the strange ceiling. He probed with his foot, looking for whatever had touched his toes earlier. His toes encountered a leg, and in one swift motion, he swept his foot up Spike's body and dug his toes into the surprised vampire's ribs, tickling him mercilessly. Spike gave a

very unmanly shriek and tried to escape off the end of the bed. Xander settled for one last dig in the ribs and let him go, throwing his long body back into a vertebrae-popping stretch.

He jackknifed into a sitting position and looked at the indignant blond vampire seething at the end of the bed, fists planted on his narrow hips. Both men burst out laughing, each raising a hand to their own hair.

"So, I'm guessing we both look like haystacks, huh?" Xander asked, trying to smooth his ruffled hair. He couldn't help but think how cute Spike looked, with his bleached locks falling in soft waves over his forehead. He shook his head at the odd juxtaposition of "cute" and "vampire" in the same thought as he gave up and just ran both hands through his own messy mop.

"Nope," Spike replied, "You look like a lion. You want breakfast?"

Xander consulted his stomach, which voted in favor of food. "What time is it?" he asked. "It's 5:30." Spike responded. "PM." He added the second response before the question could be asked.

"Huh." Xander snorted. "One day back in Sunnydale and I'm on vampire time again. Go figure."

Xander climbed out of the bed and stretched some more. Spike preceded him out of the bedroom. Xander turned into the bathroom, waving the other man to the stairs.

Spike walked down the stairs and to the kitchen in the

gloom of the well-shuttered and curtained house. He started cooking breakfast and thought about what had just occurred. After awakening, Spike had knocked at the guest room door, not terribly surprised when Xander hadn't answered. The boy had always been a heavy sleeper, plus Spike was sure that the emotions of the previous day had taken their toll. Realizing that knocking wasn't going to work, Spike had entered the room. He was happy to see Xander sleeping peacefully, the bed showing no evidence of tossing and turning. Only tufts of hair and one foot were outside the covers, so Spike had tugged the tanned toes. He had first spent a good five minutes just looking at the still form on the bed, wondering at the myriad feelings running through him. Then, realizing that he was brooding, he had shaken it off and woken the boy. The attack had been a surprise, but the laughter and goofing had been a much better way to begin the day than the embarrassment Spike had feared Xander would feel, so he counted himself lucky.

By the time Xander appeared in the kitchen, still in his sleepwear but with his face washed and teeth brushed, Spike was finishing placing omelets and crisp bacon on the table. Xander bounded over to the refrigerator and poured himself a glass of juice, checking to see if Spike already had a mug of blood in the microwave, which he did. As he passed Spike on his way to the table, he playfully kicked the vampire in the back of the knee. Spike's knee buckled slightly before he regained his footing, and he twisted his body to lightly butt his shoulder against the larger man's side. Xander absorbed the blow and dropped into his chair. As Spike moved to slide into his own chair, Xander pushed it away from under the table with his foot. Spike caught

the chair easily and slid into it, flinging a piece of toast at Xander in a smooth move. Xander fielded the toast and took a bite out of it. The two men looked at each other across the table and each raised one eyebrow.

Spike took a deep drink of his blood. "Looks like someone is feeling cocky after wasting six Horta demons last night." He observed. "That, or you finally got some sleep."

Xander grinned, and Spike was relieved to see some life in his brown eyes. "That's the best I've slept in a while," he admitted. "And, though workouts and sparring are good, I'd forgotten how therapeutic a good fight to the death could be." He smirked. "And it was seven – you killed six."

"Oh, no whelp – that last one was a joint effort – you aren't taking all the credit for him ... her ... it just because you wound up holding the larger piece."

"Oh, OK," Xander conceded with a sigh. "Six and a half each then."

Spike grunted in reply and began eating. After a few bites, he looked across the table, waiting until Xander met his eyes. He cleared his throat, and then began speaking hesitantly.

"OK, Dawn knows you're here. She wants to see you. We can go there, or she and Jase and Sara can come here." Spike hesitated, watching for Xander's reaction when he said Sara's name. He noted that the other man flinched but did not drop the eye contact. "All she knows is that you are here. You can tell her whatever

you want and I'll back you up."

Xander looked down at his plate, and both men finished their breakfast in silence. Xander drained his juice glass and pushed himself away from the table. He sighed and looked at Spike. "Let's have Dawn and her family here tonight – we can get pizza and hang out and swap stories. Before that, I need to work out – is there any clear floor space around that I can use?"

Spike nodded. "Yeah – go get your workout gear on and I'll show you the basement."

Xander picked up their plates and placed them in the sink, adding his juice glass and Spike's mug. He glanced at the back of Spike's head as the other man remained at the table and bit back the urge to thank him yet again as he turned and left the kitchen.

Spike stepped aside and let Xander precede him into the large open basement as he flicked the lights on. Xander let out a low whistle as he took in the layout of the space. The walls were painted black, the floor carpeted in steel grey. One corner held a heavy bag, a speed bag and a complete set of free weights. Part of one long wall was covered with shelves and racks that held boxing gloves, jump ropes, sparring pads and assorted martial arts weapons. With a clatter, Xander dropped the long black bag he had carried in from the car and walked quickly to the weapons. He had changed into loose black drawstring pants and a black tank, his feet still bare. He looked around the well-appointed room and tried to put his finger on what was missing. He laughed when he realized that it was the expected wall of mirrors.

As he looked around, Spike told Xander about outfitting this space, as well as the complete gym located in Angel's hotel. Spike proudly explained to Xander how he'd assisted Angel in picking out all of the equipment along with Buffy's help.

As he reached the far corner of the room, Xander reached out to lift a long weapon from where it leaned in the corner rack. Before his hand closed on it, he looked back at Spike and asked, "May I?" Spike nodded, and watched as Xander lifted the long staff that had a wicked looking curved vertical axe-head attached to one end. Spike's smile broadened as the other man stepped to the center of the floor and began twirling the weapon in an intricate pattern. He enjoyed the show, watching Xander's back and shoulders ripple as he swung the weapon in arcs in front of and behind his body. He was amazed that this lithe, graceful man before him could be the doughnut-boy of old. He moved like a jungle cat, prowling forward and back, thrusting and parrying with an imaginary opponent. Xander ended his form with a quick downward thrust of the weapon that brought him to one knee. He bounced back onto his feet and carried the weapon back to Spike, who was still waiting at the door.

Spike couldn't help but return the grin Xander turned on him. "That was nice." He said. "You know Kwan Dao" he named the long weapon.

Xander nodded toward the bag on the floor, "Get mine out of there and we'll play."

Spike dropped to his knees and unzipped the long bag.

It was full of weapons. He sifted through them carefully, noting a straight sword, a broadsword, a pair of sai, a pair of hand axes, several daggers, a bo, a triple jointed fighting stick and several things he didn't recognize before his hand closed on the smooth handle of Xander's Kwan Dao. A zippered, padded sheath covered the axe head, and the staff itself was highly polished. It was completely smooth except for three Chinese ideograms carved near the center balance point. Spike rubbed his fingertips over the carving and looked up, questioningly.

Xander touched each character as he named them. "Strength. Balance. Violence. It's our unofficial school motto." He removed the cover from the weapon and exchanged the one he held for his own, dropping the cover on the floor. As he turned back toward the practice floor he said over his shoulder, "I'd let you use mine, Spike, but it was made for my height and you're so much shorter ..." He spun around and caught the expected thrust against the handle of his Kwan Dao and the battle was on.

Metal rang on metal as the two whirled and struggled across the floor. Xander was pleased to see that he was holding his own with the vampire; though he knew Spike was not exploiting his superior strength. The two men snarled, grimaced and laughed out loud at each other as they crossed and recrossed the floor, each taking and losing the advantage numerous times.

Xander lost himself in the fight, in the primal joy of taking on a new opponent. He'd sparred with everyone in his own school so many times that the bouts had become predictable, but Spike was something

completely different. Spike felt no need to conform to the dictates of the martial arts form, so he mixed in street fighting moves, low blows and outright cheats. Finally, with a burst of preternatural speed, the vampire pinned the larger man to the wall, the Kwan Dao's blade pressed against his throat. Their eyes locked as Spike grinned triumphantly. "Ha!" he crowed, "I win."

Xander grinned back at him and gave a little whistle as he tapped the blade of his own Kwan Dao where it rested just below the blond's crotch. They both looked down and then back up at each other. Spike's grin faltered and he said in a small voice, "Draw?" Laughing, they both sank to the floor and set the weapons aside.

An hour later, they had fought with the Kwan Daos again, bo staffs, broadswords and had each logged a little time with the heavy bag. Xander had taken a hard shot to the arm from Spike's bo, and was bruising nicely. Spike's cut lip and black eye were already healing as they put the weapons away and peeled the tape off of their knuckles. Spike noted with satisfaction that Xander did not return his weapons to the bag, but placed them next to Spike's own on the shelves and in the racks, tossing his folded weapons bag onto a low shelf.

Trudging upstairs, Xander walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge. Standing in the blast of cool air, he peeled off his sweat-soaked tank and wiped his face with it. Draping the garment over one shoulder, he pulled an unopened beer out and applied it to his bruised arm. He looked up to see Spike standing in the

doorway with his back to him, pulling his tee shirt off over his head, leaving him clad in only his drenched, low hanging sweat pants. Taking a long look at the pale muscled back in front of him; Xander immediately stuck his head back into the refrigerator to cover up his surprise at having rediscovered his inner babble, which he thought he had silenced years ago.

< OK, not having the hots for Spike here, really not. Good guy, good friend, but no hots. Doesn't matter that he's gorgeous. Doesn't matter that he's kind and understanding and didn't rag me about crying on him or falling asleep with my head in his lap. Head in his lap! No, not going there. Changing direction here. Really, I am. I just admire his fighting ability – he's tough, manly, likes chicks and everything. Have to stop this. OK, I'll do the one thing I know will work. One word. Shari Shit. Shari would have LIKED him like this, would have loved to see me with a real friend, someone I was a hundred percent comfortable with. She probably wouldn't have appreciated the hots thing though. This isn't working. Need to bang head on refrigerator.>

Xander was distracted from his inner monologue by Spike's voice. It took him a moment to realize Spike was on the phone.

"Yeah, Bit – in about an hour. We just got through working out and we need to clean up." He paused, and then grinned at Xander. "Yes, half-naked and sweaty. No, you can't come over now." He paused again and Xander could practically hear Dawn whining. "Bit Bit..... Dawn! Knock it off; you're being a bad example for Sara." Spike held the phone away from his ear and

Xander really could hear Dawn's raised voice. He choked on a laugh as Spike frowned at the phone and waited for it to fall silent before returning it to his ear. "Dawn, could you cut the vampire hearing some slack, here? OK. Thank you. An hour. What do you want on your pizza? That's disgusting. Bye." He hung the phone up and shared a glance with Xander. "She's pretty excited about seeing you."

Xander grabbed another beer and tossed it to Spike as he closed the refrigerator door. He popped the top off of his own beer and drank a little. "You know what, Spike, I'm excited about seeing her, too. " He drank a third of his beer in one long swallow. "I'm gonna go clean up."

Part Five

The door flew open and Xander found himself the recipient of a lap full of smiling, shrieking, babbling, crying Dawn. He wrapped his arms tightly around her slight frame and buried his face in her shiny brown hair. After several long minutes she began to struggle, so he let her go. She sat up on his knees and braced her feet on either side of his legs on the couch. Her hands came up to caress his face, her thumbs wiping the few tears from his cheeks. She leaned forward and planted a hard kiss on his lips, then sat back and blushed furiously as he smiled at her.

"OK, so I swore to myself that if I ever saw you again

I'd kiss you, so what?" She ducked her head and returned to exploring Xander's face with her fingers. "Look at you! You're so hot! When did this all happen? How have you been? Where have you been? Where's Spike?"

Xander took her hands in his and ignored the stream of questions. "It's good to see you Dawn. I missed you. Stand up – let me get a look at you as an adult." She obediently hopped off of his knees and he stood in front of her. She was still thin and coltish, but she'd matured and gotten a little curvier. Her face was still dominated by her big eyes and even bigger smile. Her hair was shaped into a shoulder-length bob, the front held back with a little clip. She was wearing a tee shirt and jeans and had sandals on her feet. She didn't look a day over eighteen to Xander.

They both turned as they heard a commotion at the door. Xander smiled and stepped forward as a young man entered the house, leading a little girl by the hand. The child was asking questions in a steady stream, and the man was trying to answer them as fast as possible. He flashed Dawn a look of relief as she stepped forward and swept the little girl up in a hug, carrying her over to Xander. Shifting her daughter to one hip, Dawn introduced them. "Sara, this is Xander – he's an old friend of Mommy's. Xander, this is Sara." Xander could hear the happiness and pride in Dawn's voice as she presented her child.

The little girl had her mother's dark hair, broad smile and big eyes, except hers were as crystal blue as Spike's, instead of being dark blue like her mother's. Xander reached out to Sara as if to shake hands and

was gratified when she gingerly grasped one of his fingers in her tiny hand and said, "Bander" at him. Dawn giggled. The little girl looked across the room and dropped Xander's finger as she raised both arms in the air and shrieked, "Uncle Will!" at Spike, who was just coming out of the kitchen. Dawn placed the struggling girl on the ground and Xander watched open-mouthed as she ran into Spike's outstretched arms as he knelt on the floor. The vampire pulled the tiny girl up to sit on his knee, and she showered his face with kisses. "Hey there, Littlest, how are you today?" He stood up, holding the child easily as he closed the distance between himself and Dawn, giving her a one armed hug. He turned to the door. "Come on in, Jase - don't mind the family reunion." He gestured at the young man, bringing him into the small group. Dawn linked her arm through his and introduced him to Xander as her husband.

Xander shook hands with Jase and really looked at him for the first time. The younger man was slight in build. He had a shy smile, sandy hair that fell in loose waves around his face, and startling blue eyes behind gold wire-rimmed glasses. Xander's smile brightened even further as he made a quick observation and filed it away for later reflection. The two men exchanged small talk as Dawn and Spike got Sara settled on the floor with some toys and then rejoined the group.

"I ordered pizza, we've got beer and wine and soda and juice, and there's a chocolate cake for later. I've got a Disney DVD for the Bitty to watch and then some old favorites for us for later," Spike announced. He punched Xander on the arm as the other man mouthed "Martha," at him. Xander hissed as Spike's fist

connected with his bruise from earlier. Dawn turned quickly toward him and rolled up the sleeve of his black silk tee shirt, exposing the bruise.

"Um, wow," she breathed.

"Is it bad?" Xander twisted his neck to try and see the damage.

Dawn blushed. "Um, no ... I was wowing at the arm; the bruise is nothing special." Xander flexed his arm and Dawn squeaked. She quickly rolled his sleeve back down and let go, glancing guiltily at her husband, who surprised them all by laughing out loud.

"OK," Jase said ruefully, "I guess it's time to get Will to whip me into shape so Dawn can squeak at me like that." They all laughed companionably.

After they polished off three large pizzas, including the pineapple and ham monstrosity that Dawn had insisted on, the four adults lay sprawled out comfortably in the living room. Jase was on the floor, his head resting on a couch pillow, drifting in and out of a post-dinner nap. Spike was draped bonelessly over an easy chair with Sara draped equally bonelessly across his chest, fast asleep. Xander and Dawn shared the couch, each propped at an end with their legs mingling in the middle. The Disney DVD was finishing up. Xander pushed Dawn with a foot to make sure she was awake and gestured to the pizza boxes and crumpled napkins when she raised an eyebrow at him. She nodded, and they untangled themselves and began clearing the debris.

In the kitchen they bagged everything up and stepped outside to place the bags in the trash can. Xander put the lid back on the receptacle and sat down next to Dawn on the back step. Hoping he was out of the range of vampire hearing, he turned to Dawn.

"Why do Jase and Sara call Spike Will?" he asked.

She looked at him for a moment and then replied. "Yeah, it was after you left. He started going by Will again after he started getting used to the soul. You knew that his name was William when he was alive, right?" When Xander nodded, she continued. "That's how he kept the two personalities separate. Will was the soul and Spike was the demon. He had a lot of trouble getting the two sides balanced. Once he did, he realized that Spike wasn't the demon; Spike was the "real" him – the combination of the two. The demon doesn't really need its own name – not like it cares. So, those of us who knew him before call him Spike, and people who met him in the "Will" phase call him Will. We thought that Sara screaming "Uncle Spike" would be too strange, so she calls him Will. He answers to either." She hesitated. "My turn. Why did you leave?"

Xander leaned his head down on her shoulder, and she raised a hand to brush through his hair. He felt her smile against his head when he made a happy noise and leaned into the contact. "I forgot how much you like to be petted." She giggled. "You and Spike are alike that way – all touchy-feely. Like big cats. It's nice." She hesitated again. "Xander"

"I was exhausted. I didn't have any more fight left in me. I thought there was nothing for me here, and I

was miserable." He drew in a deep breath. "Can you forgive me for leaving like that, Dawnie?"

She continued to pet him, twining her fingers through his hair. "I already did, Xander – a long time ago. We all understood. You couldn't be anything here. You were always going to be the one to fix the broken window or go get stuff for Buffy if you stayed, and you needed to find your own life. Even I understood that and I was practically a child."

They sat silently for a while, and Xander put his arm around Dawn's slender waist, snuggling in closer. "I missed you. I missed all of you," he said quietly. "You've changed so much. Spike, too."

Dawn laughed. "Did you notice his accent?" Xander thought for a moment and then shook his head. She continued, "Over the last few years he's lost that tough-guy accent, and he sounds way more like Giles than he used to. He also stopped calling everyone 'luv' and 'mate.'" He mostly calls people by their actual names now, except for Sara and me. He's also so much steadier than he used to be. It's nice."

Xander lifted his head and looked at Dawn. "He's been great to me since I got here. I could hardly believe it. Well, except for the bruise."

"Spike hit you?" she asked incredulously.

Xander laughed. "We sparred this afternoon, it's no big deal."

"What were you doing sparring with him – he's super

strong. You're lucky all you got was a bruise!" her eyes flashed at him.

Xander ducked his head. "Give me some credit, Dawn, I actually managed to give him a black eye and bust his lip. Already healed though."

Dawn's eyes widened. "Oh, so those muscles aren't just for show, then? I guess you'll have to help Spike train Jase, too!"

Xander smiled. "Jase is great – so's Sara. You have a beautiful family."

She nodded, "I never thought I'd be so lucky."

They were still smiling at each other when the door opened behind them and Jase stepped out onto the porch. He dropped a hand to the top of his wife's head. "Will went to put Sara down – he says we should come in and have cake."

Before the last word was out of his mouth the dark haired man and woman were on their feet, heading for the door. Jase laughed and followed.

Sara was sleeping peacefully upstairs and cake and cocoa had been consumed. Spike, Dawn and Jase all sat around the kitchen table, looking at Xander. He stood nervously in front of them, clutching a medium-sized black book. Spike pushed the fourth chair toward him with his foot, and he sank into it gratefully. He laid the book on the table in front of Dawn, who sat in the middle. He cleared his throat.

"OK. This book sort of answers the million-dollar question: What has Xander been doing for the past eight years? You guys ready for this?" He looked around the table and into two sets of ice blue eyes and one set of navy ones. Seeing nothing but support and curiosity, he opened the book. All three laughed out loud. The first page was an enlarged picture of a mug shot.

"Ah, yes," Xander began "My short-lived life of crime. A bar brawl in Albuquerque. I'd been out of Sunnydale for a month. I guess I'd gotten used to fighting. I got the living crap beaten out of me in jail."

The next page showed the "Welcome To ..." signs of various small towns across the West. Xander continued with his narration. "I traveled the world, or at least the parts that weren't too terribly far. I slung many exotic kinds of hash and built many substandard structures."

The next pages showed Xander with other people. In most of the pictures he looked drawn and haunted, but in one he was actually smiling. In the photo he was sitting at what looked like a restaurant table between two other young men. The one on his left had curly red hair and a huge grin, but was looking at something outside the frame. The man on Xander's right had close-cropped dark hair and a goatee. His green eyes stood out in the photo. He had his arm around Xander's shoulders and they were both smiling widely at the camera. Dawn reached out to touch the photo and said, "You look happy here."

Xander looked down at the photo, and his finger joined

Dawn's on the photo, his touching the green-eyed young man. He swallowed.

"That's Danny. We ... dated, for a while. We had a lot of fun, but the relationship was stormy at best. He left me for Julian." Xander's finger moved across the photo to point at the redhead. Dawn met Xander's eyes and smiled at him sympathetically. "That stinks," she said. "It's OK," Xander replied. "I broke them up in the first place."

Dawn snorted. Xander couldn't bring himself to meet Spike's eyes. He knew that he could have skipped over the story of Danny, or just said they were buddies. He also knew himself well enough to know that he'd told the story for a reason, and that the reason had something to do with Spike.

The next few pages of the book showed scenery shots. Xander explained that he'd taken them on the cross-country drive that had landed him in Atlanta. A page of photos showed a bright, clean-looking city under a sunny blue sky. There was one photo of Xander, sitting on the hood of his crappy car looking exhausted. Dawn frowned when she saw this one.

"You can say it." Xander spoke quietly. "I looked like Hell. I call that the 'rock bottom picture'. I had a drug problem, I was broke, and I couldn't sleep without having nightmares about demons. I hated my life and myself. I was even more miserable than when I left Sunnydale. You can turn the page – it gets better from there." He smiled at Dawn encouragingly, and she flipped the page. Again, all three of his audience members burst out laughing. The next page was a

photo of Xander in a white martial arts uniform, sprawled on the floor looking pissed. A tiny Japanese woman stood over him with an inscrutable expression on her face, one hand reaching down to help him up. Xander swallowed audibly. "That's Shari."

Xander sat with his head bowed for a moment, and he felt a light touch as Spike's hand brushed over his own, which rested on his knee under the table. On impulse, he captured Spike's hand and clasped it hard, fighting to remain in control. Spike's cool hand squeezed his back strongly, his attention never leaving the photo album page.

In a measured tone, using the photos, he told the story of how he and Shari had met at the martial arts school. He explained how they had become friends, teacher and student, and then lovers. How Shari had encouraged him to go to school and get a good job. There were pictures of his graduation, their first apartment, their first "good" car, Shari receiving her black belt, and Xander doing the same. There was an engagement photo, with Xander looking absolutely dumbstruck at the tiny woman at his side. His fingers brushed the photo.

"I couldn't believe she wanted to marry me. Hell, I couldn't believe she wanted to date me. She was so incredible." He clutched Spike's hand even harder; glad that there was no way he could hurt the vampire.

Dawn turned the page and said "Wow". The left page showed Xander, barefoot and shirtless, wearing a pair of black drawstring pants. Shari stood in front of him in a black sports bra and similar pants. They were both

holding a stylized pose with their arms stretched above their heads and intertwined. Shari's eyes were closed, her head tilted back. Xander was looking down at her with a breathtaking expression of love and longing on his face. Dawn drew her finger down the black and white portrait. "This is awesome," she said.

The right-hand page was another posed portrait, this one of Xander alone. He faced the camera at an angle. He was holding the handle of a jointed metal strand that flowed across his bare shoulders. The handle had yellow and red silk scarves tied to it that trailed down his side. His muscles stood out in sharp relief, and he stared out of the frame.

Spike spoke for the first time since they had settled at the table. He traced his fingers across the weapon in the picture and asked, "What's that?"

Xander chuckled and replied, "It's a chain whip – I'll show you sometime. It's incredibly destructive; you'll love it." They shared a smile and Xander felt Spike's hand tighten on his. Reluctantly, Xander released Spike's cool hand from his sweaty one and turned the next page of the book himself. As the others took in the image, Xander started twisting the two platinum bands on his left ring finger. It was his and Shari's wedding portrait. In the photo, she stood directly in front of him. She was wearing a long, white silk sheath with delicate straps. Her black hair spilled out from under a pure white veil that was attached to her hair with tiny white roses. She carried a bouquet of white calla lilies. Xander's arms were around her tiny waist, and he towered over her as she was tucked neatly under his chin. His black tuxedo and gleaming white

shirt emphasized his dark coloring and deep tan. They looked ecstatically happy.

The next few pages showed typical wedding shots, the last one was of their hands crossed over Shari's bouquet, emphasizing their rings. Shari wore a diamond solitaire and platinum band that matched the thick one on Xander's hand. Spike wondered for a moment about the thinner band that Xander also wore. He looked up and realized that Xander had removed both bands from his hand and was holding them out to him. Meeting Xander's eyes with a questioning look, he took the two rings and turned them over in his hands. They were both engraved on the inside. The thicker one said "Shari", the thinner one "Lex". As Dawn turned the page, all three voices asked as one "Who's Lex?"

Xander touched the photo on the last page of the book. It was a 3-D sonogram photo. Under the picture was scrawled the name Lex. Three pairs of blue eyes searched for brown ones, but Xander chose to look deeply into Spike's.

"Lex was my son," he said quietly. "He was never born. When Shari was murdered he died with her."

Part Six

Spike closed the front door behind Jase, Dawn and Sara. Just as Xander had dropped his bombshell, Sara had awakened. Spike had gestured for Dawn and Jase to go get her, and the vampire had turned back to Xander just in time to see the dark man slip out the back door. With a sigh, he'd joined the others in getting Sara ready to go home and to bed. They had

not spoken about the night's revelations, but as Dawn hugged Spike on her way out the door she had whispered fiercely in his ear, "Take care of him." Spike listened, and was able to hear Xander's heartbeat. It was slow and steady. He followed the sound to the back porch.

Xander stood at the bottom of the stairs. He was still barefoot, wearing the black jeans and black silk tee he'd changed into after their sparring earlier in the day. The wind had picked up, and Xander was facing into it, his long hair blowing back from his face. Spike looked at his profile, silhouetted in the moonlight, the tracks of drying tears shining on his cheeks. Xander turned toward the other man and a small smile twisted his lips. He gestured for Spike to join him and seated himself on the bottom step. Spike settled next to him. Xander felt a soft touch on the back of his hand. He looked at Spike and felt his cool hand press the two platinum bands into his palm. As he realized what they were, he clutched Spike's hand in his briefly, and then pulled away to resettle the rings into their familiar groove.

The two men sat in silence, listening to the wind blow. After a few moments, Xander turned on the stair, pulling one knee up and wrapping his arms around it so he could face Spike. He looked at the vampire until the blue eyes met his and then began to speak.

"Spike, I need you to shut up for a few minutes and let me say some things." He paused to grin as Spike's eyebrows raised and his mouth opened and then shut with a nod. Xander drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Spike, I owe you a lot right now." He shot the

other man a quelling look as his mouth opened again. "I owe you a world of thanks, for accepting me, for putting me up, and putting up with me; I owe you major gratitude for the comfort you've offered me since I showed up. I didn't know how much I needed it, really. And don't think it's done – I'm still a wreck, so I'm probably gonna fall apart on you again shortly."

Xander took another deep breath. In coming back to Sunnydale, he had known that he owed apologies to all of his friends. He had practiced what he would say to Dawn and Buffy and Willow, but had been unable to plan what to say to Spike, not knowing what to expect from the vampire. He plunged ahead with his explanation. "The main thing I owe you is an apology, and it's been a long time coming. When I left Sunnydale, and for all the time we knew each other, I was a complete asshole. I treated you like crap, and I'm both stunned and humbled that you are able to even talk to me now, much less treat me like a friend." As he spoke these words, Xander realized exactly how true they were. The easy, simple friendship that Spike had shown him in the previous 24 hours had made him feel safe and calm for the first time in six months. He drew in another breath and kept talking. "I, I ...hate like hell to admit it, but I resented you because I always felt like you were in my way. For some stupid reason I thought that if you hadn't been around I could have maybe had a shot with Buffy. And I hated like hell that you slept with Anya." Xander paused and raised a hand as Spike's mouth opened yet again.

"Not yet. I'm not done; you get to talk in a minute." Xander softened his words with a small smile. "I know now that I never had a chance with Buffy; and I know

that you and her together was not about love or anything good. And I even understand the whole bathroom scene." Xander saw the pain in Spike's face and reached over to touch the other man's hand. "I said some awful things to you after that, and I hid behind a lot of inflated self-righteousness that was only fronting for jealousy. I was so angry that you were the only one who could make her feel anything then, so I just let loose on you." He took in another long breath and let it out with a shuddery sigh. "Let's not even waste any breath on Anya. I really understand that one now. She was hurting, you were hurting – and you used each other to feel loved, or even just liked for a little while. I can honestly say I understand that now. So, I guess what I'm doing is saying that I'm sorry, and I'm asking for forgiveness."

Spike quirked his scarred eyebrow at Xander, who laughed and said, "OK, your turn to talk."

"Xan, why don't we give all of that crap from the past a skip, yeah? Neither of us was exactly the model citizen at the time. I said and did a lot of things back then that I'm not exactly proud of either. I accept your apology." He paused, and the two men smiled at one another. Spike looked down, and then met Xander's brown eyes again. "The reason I'm treating you like a friend is because you are my friend. We should have been better friends before – I always thought we had the most in common of the whole gang. Hell, maybe that's why we couldn't get along. We've both done a lot of growing up in the last eight years. You were a kid then, and I was pretty much an adolescent myself, at least as far as behavior goes. I hope that we're both better people now."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Xander surprised himself by breaking it to ask a question.

“When you were a human, did you look like Jase?”

Spike spluttered, “Huh? Like Jase?” He paused, and said, in a voice filled with wonder, “Bloody hell! You’re right! I did look a lot like him. I never noticed.” Spike’s mouth hung open.

“When I met him tonight, I realized it. He’s about your size, but slighter, and his eyes are really close, but not as beautiful. He’s got your same bone structure. Put brown hair and glasses on you and there you are – Human Spike, er ... William, I guess.” Xander grinned broadly. “I bet if we got him to do the accent it would be uncanny!”

Spike shut his mouth, equally taken aback by the thought that Dawn’s husband looked like his human self and that Xander had said his eyes were beautiful. Xander kept speaking.

“Do you think Dawn did it on purpose? I wonder if she’d even admit it. Figures, though. Another reason I hated you – displacing me as Dawn’s crush object. Heh. I leave town and she married a lookalike. Who would have guessed?”

Spike finally smiled and shot Xander a sideways look. “Just how many reasons to hate me did you have? And did you keep an actual list on paper, or was it just mental?”

"Oh, it was mental, all right. Mostly just Buffy, Anya, Dawn, being cooler than me, stronger than me, more useful than me, and probably a couple more." Xander ticked off the reasons on his fingers. Spike stared at him for a long moment, appraisingly.

"Xan, when did you get so honest?"

Xander sighed. "It was Shari. Man, she wouldn't let me get away with a thing. She made me take responsibility for everything. I thought I knew about responsibility – you know, saving the world since I was fifteen and all? But I had zero sense of personal responsibility. I wanted everything to be somebody else's fault, and she wouldn't let me play that game for a second. God, she was tough. She made a man out of me." Xander lapsed into silence, lost in thought. He almost missed Spike's very quiet comment.

"She made a good man out of you, luv."

Part Seven

Xander lay across Spike's comfortable guest bed trying not to toss and turn. He knew the vampire was still awake downstairs, and was trying to act the part of exhausted guest he'd played to come upstairs. He thought about the conversation with Spike, and how, for the first time since her death he had been able to share a comment or story about his wife without feeling sad. When he'd explained to Spike how Shari

had changed him, he'd felt pride and love, but no sadness. He didn't know if this was a good or bad thing. He desperately feared moving on. He didn't know if he wanted to live in a world where Shari was just a memory, though that seemed inevitable. Xander didn't know if he was ready to let go of the tangible thing that was his grief.

Turning his thoughts away from Shari, he thought about Spike. Could this truly be the Bleached Menace, Fangless, Deadboy Jr.? Being so nice? He thought about Spike's earlier comment that they had both grown up. It was true; he had finally made it to adulthood, though many days he still felt like a scared teenager taking on the world. He also realized that Spike's journey had probably been even harder than his. Thinking about the guilt that Spike must have felt when his soul realized all of the things he'd done – all the pain and death and destruction, Xander felt tears prickle behind his eyelids.

Then he thought about the truly bizarre picture of Spike and Sara together. The toddler had barely left her "Uncle Will's" arms the entire time she'd been in the house. Her sweet little face had shone with love for him. Xander also realized that she didn't make him think of Lex. It hurt him that he'd never been able to hold his son, hear his voice, or watch him play; but Sara wasn't Lex, she was her own person and Xander already loved her as an extension of Dawn. He also marveled at Dawn's maturity; she'd forgiven him instantly for his shoddy treatment of her, with zero guilt or whining – remarkable.

Turning over in bed and rearranging the pillows,

Xander stretched out on his back and let his thoughts turn to Spike again; specifically to his feelings of attraction toward Spike. He thought about all of the touches they had shared, from Spike's light touch on his shoulder when he'd arrived and the hand in his hair while he'd cried against the vampire's legs, to the cool hard hand gripping his under the table tonight in support. There had also been assorted small touches, a tap on the shoulder, a hand up when they were sparring. Xander analyzed each one to try and divine if Spike was being anything other than merely friendly.

Dawn had mentioned how tactile both Spike and Xander were. Xander acknowledged the truth in that. He was a sucker for simple physical affection. Early in his relationship with Shari, he had apologized for his need to constantly hold her hand or lean against her. She had shushed him and drawn him closer, establishing a pattern of placing her tiny hand on the inside of his wrist and scratching lightly. That simple contact had gotten him through many nights where he had trouble sleeping – all she had to do was pet him like that and he'd fallen asleep in minutes. Shari was as good a recipient as she was a giver; he'd spent hours brushing her long black hair, making it shine like silk as it flowed to her waist or rubbing her feet after she insisted on wearing ridiculously high heels to dinner.

Xander decided that he truly didn't know if Spike felt anything for him beyond friendship. He also decided that he wanted to know, badly. Did he have the balls to just go and ask the vampire? He didn't quite know the answer to that one, either. He listened as hard as he could, trying to hear Spike downstairs. He couldn't discern any noise. Making up his mind he slid to the

side of the bed and grabbed the burgundy sleep pants crumpled on the floor and pulled them on over his nakedness. He ran a hand through his hair and left the room quietly.

The kitchen and living room were empty. Xander stopped in the kitchen and poured himself a glass of juice. Carrying it, he wandered toward the side of the house he'd yet to enter, and saw lamplight gleaming through an open door. He stepped forward and paused in the doorway, taking in the room before him. It was a library. The walls were lined from floor to ceiling with cherry bookcases, and almost every shelf was filled to bursting with books. The room was an interior one, so there were no windows. The few breaks in the bookcases were hung with paintings, or formed nooks to display sculpture or art objects. One corner of the room had two more leather club chairs like those in the kitchen; the room was also furnished with a large desk and two desk chairs and a tufted leather sofa with a lamp table at one end.

Only the lamp on the table lighted the room, and Spike was lying on the sofa. He was wearing a pair of black sleep pants similar to Xander's, along with another cream-colored long-sleeved tee shirt. A soft-looking throw blanket was bunched up on the end of the sofa, and his feet were dug under its warm folds. A short glass of amber liquid was on the floor by his head, and he had a large book propped up on his chest. He was engrossed in reading it, staring through the lenses of his gold wire-framed glasses.

Xander raised his glass of juice to his lips and took a swallow. The small sound caught Spike's attention, and

he peered at the intruder over the top of his glasses, lowering the book. He smiled gently. "Couldn't sleep?"

Xander smiled and gestured at the glasses Spike wore, "Those are just like Jase's." he pointed out. The two men shared a smile. Spike bent his knees to clear a space on the couch and gestured for Xander to sit. Xander took the offered seat and placed his own glass on the hardwood floor. He picked up the throw blanket and spread it over his chest, making sure the excess material pooled beside him to cover Spike's bare feet. Spike placed his book on the floor and retrieved his drink. Xander watched his Adam's apple bob as he took a long swallow and then replaced the glass on the floor.

"I like this room," he observed. "It's like Giles' house."

Spike glanced around. "Some of the books were his; he left them to me."

Xander started in alarm. "Giles isn't d-d" he stammered, eyes searching Spike's face.

One of Spike's cold feet prodded Xander's thigh. "No, you git – he's fine. He left them with me when he moved back to England. They up and begged him to come help rebuild the Watcher's Council. He's a big muckety-muck at HQ now."

"Oh, good, good." Xander replied with relief. "I was scared for a minute there." He realized that he had grabbed the foot that had prodded him and was still holding it. "Your feet are like ice, Spike. And yes, I know – dead, here." He pulled both of Spike's feet into his lap and tucked the end of the blanket around them,

his hand resting with his fingers lightly encircling the thin, cool ankle. If asked, he could not have easily explained his obvious compulsion for touching his one-time enemy. He thought about it for a second and realized that Spike was the first person he'd shared any kind of physical contact with since Shari's death, outside of a lot of sympathetic hugs and handshakes.

Xander rubbed his fingers across the ankle under his hand and waited for the vampire to look at him. Spike slowly pulled off his glasses and met Xander's questioning gaze. "Um, Spike? Does this bother you? Me, um, touching you?"

Spike's expression was unreadable as he slipped one of the earpieces of his glasses into his mouth and chewed it in an absent and completely endearing gesture. His eyes never left those of the man in front of him. "No, Xan – it doesn't bother me. I like it. You're so warm." They sat in silence for a moment, Xander's fingers moved in small circles on Spike's ankle and Spike shifted his foot into the touch. Xander spoke again. "I have this thing about contact and, well, since Shari's been gone these six months, I've been really"

"Lonely?" Spike asked. Xander nodded. "And you don't want me to get the wrong idea?" Spike asked with a wry tone.

Xander looked across the sofa and into wary blue eyes. He smiled gently. "Spike ... Will ... I don't know if there's a wrong idea to get." He was startled when Spike's eyes lost the wariness and widened, and he felt a slight tremor run through the smaller man. His hand stilled on the ankle it was holding. "What? What is it?"

The blue eyes softened, and Spike lowered his eyes and cleared his throat. "Er, you called me Will." Xander couldn't read the tone in his voice. So, he asked, "Is that OK?" Spike's blue eyes rose to his again and he nodded. "Yeah." He smiled what Xander could only think of as a shy smile. "It's ... nice." Xander's fingers started circling again on Spike's – Will's ankle and he came to a decision. "I need to go to L.A. We need to go to L.A." Xander stated. Blue eyes flew to his face again and Spike sat up spluttering, "Wha ... huh ... what the hell?"

Xander reached out and pulled his friend to his side, turning the pale, angular face toward his own and holding it still. "There's more to the story of Shari's murder, much more. It's why I came here. And I need you and Dawn and Jase and Buffy and Angel and the L.A. Gang and Willow to help me sort it out. And once you know everything, maybe – just maybe we can take a minute and figure out if this is just friendly hand holding and foot-rubbing, or if there's something between us or not. Because, suddenly, I REALLY want to know. How about you, Will? Do you want to know?" Xander's eyes searched Spike's face as his hand dropped from the other man's chin.

Spike hesitated for a bare second, then leaned in and lightly brushed his lips against Xander's. Blue and brown eyes closed as they both leaned forward a fraction of an inch to turn the light brush of lips into a tantalizing glide. Xander changed the tilt of his head to capture those smooth, cool lips with his own, and gently flicked his tongue out to taste the vampire's full lower lip. The taste of Scotch and the scent of Spike

filled his senses and he groaned against the kiss. Spike took the opportunity to slide his tongue briefly into Xander's mouth, just tasting the inside of his lips for a moment and then retreating. Then he broke the kiss. Two sets of eyes opened languidly; harsh pants filled the small space between them. Spike whispered, his voice much huskier than usual "Yeah, Xan, I want to know." He swallowed audibly. "I'll call L.A.; you call Willow."

Part Eight

After the phone calls were made, Xander had gone back to bed. Once there, he had relived the kiss a hundred times, and had looked blindly up at the ceiling and asked Shari for her forgiveness or her blessing or something to help him not feel awful. His heart ached at the thought that hers were no longer the last lips he had kissed. At the same time, it soared at the joy that little kiss had brought him. Kissing Spike had been so much better than he had ever imagined it. Still struggling with his emotions, he had finally slept.

When he awoke the next afternoon, he had found all the arrangements finalized. Xander, Spike, Jase, Dawn and Sara would leave Sunnydale at sundown on Friday, two days hence, to meet the L.A. contingent at Angel's hotel. Willow would fly into LAX that same night. Then Xander would take the floor and tell the story he'd been carrying around for six months.

He'd been a little embarrassed to face Spike the next morning, but the awkwardness had passed as soon as he'd realized that Spike was still treating him the same way. They had eaten, and then cleaned the kitchen. Xander had asked about the changes in Sunnydale over the years, so they had watched TV until full dark and then headed out in Xander's car to take a tour.

Xander had enjoyed pointing out some of the places he'd worked and sites where he'd gotten his ass kicked repeatedly. Spike had dredged up at least one spectacularly implausible demon-killing story for each of the seven cemeteries they had passed. At the eighth, Xander had parked the car and they had exited the vehicle in silence. Spike reached into the backseat for the bag they'd gotten earlier, and they had moved grimly up the path. They stopped in front of a beautifully carved headstone – each pausing to read the words there: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." As one they had stooped to pull a few weeds from around the grave's perimeter. Once finished, they had carefully unpacked the flowers and placed them reverently on Tara Maclay's grave. They'd stood in silence for a moment, and then Xander had begun to speak.

"Hey, Tara. I've kinda been a long time gone, but, then again, so have you. I've missed you. We brought you some flowers." He smiled down at the slender white blooms he'd placed in the vase attached to the headstone. "The calla lilies are from Willow. She misses you the most, I think. She's going to come see you herself, soon. Next week." He grinned and looked over at Spike, who raised his eyebrow at him. "The

roses are from me and Spike. He wanted red and I wanted white, so we compromised and got some of each." Xander chuckled. "You're probably spinning in there to hear that Spike and I have compromised, but, hey – times change, people change, vampires change." Xander cleared his throat against the lump that was forming. "Tara, I need to ask you to do something for me. You were always so good – the best of all of us, so I know you're in whatever place the good people go to." His voice roughened and became more urgent. "There's somebody new there, somebody who's very special to me." He laughed again and it almost sounded like a sob. "You can't miss her – tiny little Asian girl, she's probably kicking everybody's ass. Her name is Shari Harris and she's either pregnant or has a little baby with her; I'm not sure how things work there. That little baby is my son, Lex. If...if you could watch out for them, I'd really appreciate it. I know if it can be done, you'll do it. And I promise that I'll do a better job of taking care of Willow for you from now on." He paused, tears streaming unheeded down his face as he bowed his head. On a deep, shuddering breath he whispered, "Tell them I love them."

Spike touched his elbow and stepped past him to lay his hand on the top of Tara's headstone, standing silently with his head bowed for a moment. He then turned and stood directly in front of Xander, offering comfort, if the taller man needed it. Xander lifted his head and met Spike's eyes, which were bright with unshed tears. He leaned his forehead against Spike's and closed his eyes. Each man's hand came up to rest at the nape of the other's neck, and they stood silently for a long time.

After visiting Tara's grave they had stopped at the convenience store for ice cream. On returning to Spike's Victorian they had each eaten an enormous hot fudge sundae and then had settled onto the couch to watch a movie. By halfway through the most recent remake of "Dracula" they had moved slowly but surely from their spots at either end of the couch toward the middle and each other. Finally Spike had simply used his superior strength to manhandle Xander into position so that they were spooned together with Xander's back pressed against his chest, Spike's hand draped over Xander's side with their fingers loosely intertwined, a blanket thrown over them. By the end of the movie they were both asleep, Xander's head pillowed on Spike's bicep and one of Spike's legs caught between Xander's, the other following the curve of the human's backside; Spike's nose buried in the wavy, silken hair at the back of Xander's neck.

Sometime during the night, Spike had woken to the exquisite feel of Xander pressing a warm, soft kiss to his palm and closing his hand around it. He had been unable to stop himself from returning the kiss to the back of the human's neck. He'd then waited, holding an unneeded breath as Xander had murmured in his sleep. When he'd made out the words, "Mmmmmmm ... Spike," he had sighed with relief and slipped back to sleep.

In the early afternoon, Spike had awoken very glad that he didn't need to breathe. Somehow, Xander had managed to reverse their positions and was now lying almost directly on top of Spike, who was face down on the couch. Xander's chin was hooked over the vampire's shoulder, one arm was hanging off the edge

of the couch and the other was curled around Spike so that they were both lying on top of it. Spike could feel Xander's warm hand covering his chest and wondered how it could still be warm with the circulation cut off by their combined weight. The other thing Spike had noticed was what felt like a very substantial morning erection pressed against his ass.

He was having an "angel on one shoulder, devil on the other" conversation with himself when the human began to stir. The devil was all for wiggling around a bit to see what kind of wonderful things they could do with Xander's morning wood; the angel was concerned with how embarrassed the boy was going to be when he woke up in this position. Xander's returning consciousness dictated a quick decision, so Spike decided to take the chicken's way out. He pretended to be asleep until the boy hauled himself off of the smaller body, making hissing noises about the "pins and needles" sensation in his arm. He had then leaned down and given Spike a short, hard kiss on the cheek and wandered off to the bathroom.

The rest of the day had been peaceful. They had moved about the house, straightening up and dealing with normal domestic chores. In the late afternoon Xander had gone outside to mow the lawn, a job usually handled by Jase. Xander enjoyed the physical labor and the feeling of the afternoon sun on his bare shoulders. Since arriving in Sunnydale, he really had been keeping vampire hours, so this was one of the few times he'd been out in the daylight. He carefully worked his way around Spike's lawn, and then spent another hour trimming the bushes and weeding the plantings. Upon returning to the house at sunset, he'd

found Spike in the kitchen, sitting at the table wearing his glasses and flipping through a cookbook. Xander helped himself to a beer and stood in front of the open refrigerator door to cool off. He turned to find crystal blue eyes on him, and Spike's head tilted as he scented the air.

"Sorry," Xander had ducked his head, embarrassed at his smell. "I'm sure I reek."

The blue eyes had swiveled to his face. "You smell like sunshine." The vampire's tone was wistful.

"You miss it, don't you?" Xander asked, in a sudden burst of perceptiveness.

The glasses were removed, the earpiece slipping between pink lips. "I do," Spike said slowly. "I loved the sunlight when I was human – I loved the warmth, the way it soaked into my bones." He barked a short laugh. "Did you know about the Gem of Amarra?" He looked at Xander, who nodded. "I had it for a little while. I wasted it. I used my time to try and kick the Slayer's ass. I should have left town. I could have been on the beach, but I just had to use it to try and beat Buffy. I was so stupid then." He sighed. "I should have known that she'd stomp me and take it away, she usually did."

Xander closed the door of the refrigerator and sat down across from Spike. He tapped his finger on the cover of the cookbook to draw the vampire out of his reflective mood. "Hey, why don't I cook tonight? I'll give you a taste of what little Southern cooking I learned in Atlanta." Spike grinned at him and nodded

enthusiastically. "Cool. I'll get a shower and then get started – you go ... do whatever you do when I'm not here." He made a vague waving gesture with his hand. "Whatever that is."

Spike grinned at him. "OK, that sounds good to me. Anything special you want to do tonight?"

Xander thought for a moment. "Nah, let's just hang. I think we would both appreciate some downtime before we get thrown into the big L.A. slumber party. I need to make some calls and stuff anyway."

Rising from his seat Spike nodded. "Sounds good to me – I'll be in the library if you want me." He left the room, still chewing on his glasses absently.

Oh, I'm pretty sure I want you, Xander thought, watching the vampire walk out the door. Pulling on his beer Xander thought about how he'd woken up that morning. He had played it cool, but waking up with his hard on pressed tightly against the cleft of Spike's ass was a memory that was sticking in his head like a burr in a hiking sock. The body under his had been so hard, not soft and yielding like Shari's. Shari had been strong, but so tiny and feminine – Spike was all hard muscle and sinew. He fought down the urge to run into the library and jump the blond. With a sigh he headed up to the shower.

Xander wiped his hand on the dishtowel draped over his shoulder and slapped Spike's hand away from the lid of the frying pan. "No you don't – you'll screw it up." Xander's eyes darkened as the vampire raised the hand

to his mouth, sucking at the red spot the tap had made. He pulled the hand away from Spike's mouth with a small, wet sound. Never taking his eyes off of the blue ones before him, he gently kissed the spot, then licked it, then, on impulse, bit it lightly. Xander felt himself become instantly erect when Spike's eyes rolled back in his head and a low growl emanated from him. When the blue eyes met his again, they were cloudy with passion.

Xander suddenly found himself pinned against the door of the refrigerator. Spike's hands were on either side of his head, his own arms hanging at his sides. The vampire's hard body was sealed against his from breastbone to groin, and there was no mistaking his intent, as their erections pressed firmly together, each fitting into the curve of the other's hip. Their faces were barely an inch apart. Xander sucked in a shaky breath and shifted his hips experimentally against Spike; they both hissed at the contact and Spike stretched his neck to close the distance between their lips. This was not the gentle exploration of the previous night; Xander could feel the stainless steel behind his head, cool and hard. The mouth against his was also cool and hard, and Spike was plundering his mouth, sweeping his tongue around Xander's and tangling them together. Xander moaned into the mouth on his and brought his hands up to wind into the surprisingly soft blond waves.

As Xander's fists closed in his hair, Spike opened his mouth even wider and thrust his lower body against Xander's in a long, taut stroke that sent Xander's senses spinning. Spike broke the kiss and started speaking, stopping to kiss and lick Xander's neck

between phrases. Xander's head rolled against the barrier behind him as he tried desperately to make sense of the vampire's words over the rush of blood in his head. "God, Xan – you're so hot. You feel so good. Want you so much." Xander gasped as blunt teeth nibbled over his jugular, followed by the slick rasp of his tongue. "Stop me, luv – if you don't want me stop me now." Xander couldn't believe the naked, begging tone against his neck. Tightening his hands in the blond's hair until he knew it had to hurt, he reluctantly dragged Spike's mouth away from his neck, putting a couple of inches between their faces, but not moving their bodies apart at all.

He stared into Spike's face until the blue eyes opened and looked back at him, and he winced at the pain he saw there. "Oh God," Spike groaned. "I'm sorry, lu,v" he gritted out. "It was just that you bit me, and, well – vampire." He tried to smile, but fell short, looking down. Using the hands still coiled in the blond hair, Xander forced Spike to meet his eyes. Making sure that the other man was looking at him, he moved his own hips against Spike in a lazy thrust once, and then again. When the blue eyes started to cloud again with passion, he stopped, and they both panted harshly for a moment. Xander tilted his head and brushed his mouth against the kiss-bruised lips before him.

"I stopped you for a reason, and it's not that I don't want you." He shifted his hips again for emphasis. "I think you can feel how much I want you, Will. I burn for you." He paused, and kissed those beautiful lips again lightly. "I stopped you because this has to wait until you know the whole story of why I'm here. I can't risk this going too far until you know everything."

Blue eyes searched his face, and then the vampire nodded once. He kissed Xander lightly and peeled his body away from the wonderfully warm one against him, forcing himself to push off from the refrigerator with both hands. Once he was standing in his own space, he laid his hand flat on Xander's chest to feel his heartbeat. He smiled as he felt it thud quickly under his palm. "OK, Xan. I've waited this long; I can wait another day or so. You can tell me in your own time and in your own way." He sighed and removed his hand from the brunet, running that same hand through his hair. "But I don't think there's anything you can tell me that will make me not want you." He pretended not to hear when Xander whispered, "I hope that's true," as he turned back to the stove just in time to save the fried chicken.

Grunts and moans filled the air in the kitchen as mouths worked feverishly and hands became slick. Spike and Xander devoured the pieces of fried chicken like starving men, pausing only to add to the growing pile of soiled paper napkins on the table between them. Once they had each reduced several pieces of chicken to small piles of bones, they feasted on the rice and cream gravy, green beans, creamed corn and fluffy biscuits Xander had prepared. Xander drained his glass of iced tea and Spike thumped his empty blood mug down on the table. Both men reached under the table and unbuttoned the top buttons of their jeans to ease the pain of overfull stomachs.

"Bloody hell, that was good!" Spike exclaimed. "How'd you get so skinny if they feed you like that all the time, whelp?"

Xander grinned and smothered a belch in yet another napkin. "Spike, my wife was Japanese – we were much more likely to have sushi than fried chicken. I got this stuff maybe once a month – if I was lucky." He smiled across the table. "And I'm not skinny – I'm trim." Xander tried in vain to suck in his distended belly. He groaned with the effort. "OK, I'm fat."

"Not fat – you're fluffy." Spike howled with laughter at the expression that comment caused on Xander's face. "I'm sorry – it's something we told Dawn when she was preggers with the Littlest Bit. Come to think of it, she didn't like it either." He ducked as a crumpled napkin soared toward him, still chuckling.

"I'm glad you enjoyed dinner – I haven't cooked in a while. Glad to see I haven't lost my touch."

They were still sitting in companionable silence when the phone rang. They looked at one another for a moment and automatically dropped into a game of "Rock, Paper, Scissors" to see who had to get up and answer it. Xander lost. He sighed deeply and dragged himself to his feet. Spike watched him lean against the wall to answer the phone, one hand rubbing at the soft hair on his lower abdomen.

"Hello?" he paused, listening. "This is he. Hello, sir. Is anything wrong?" Spike tensed to cross the room to Xander, but relaxed when the other man did the same, slumping back into his position against the wall. "Oh, good. I was scared for a minute." Xander laughed sheepishly. "I forgot I left you this number when I called last night – I thought there was some kind of

emergency. Paranoia – it's not a pretty thing, I know." Another long pause, then Xander laughed. "Really? That's awesome. I'll be in L.A. for a week or so starting Saturday. We should get together." Another pause. "You really want to do that? For me? I'm, well, I'm honored, sir. Sunday? Well, I'll be with some friends, and we're pretty booked during the day – would evening work?" Xander turned a brilliant smile on Spike, and the vampire wondered what had his human so excited. "That's awesome! Thank you, sir. Hey – the friends I'm staying with have a great gym – do you want to come to us? Great – I'll call you with details when we get into L.A." Xander concluded his phone call and practically bounced back to his seat at the table.

Spike raised an eyebrow in question. "What's got you so Tigger-ish, pet?"

"Number one – you with the Disney references? Big wiggins." Xander smiled at Spike's scowl. "Number two – that was my master. Down vampire!" he squeaked. "Not that kind of master – my martial arts teacher – head guy – master! It's a rank!" Spike's eyes had flashed yellow, his nostrils had flared and he'd snarled almost inaudibly when the word "master" had left Xander's lips. Spike shook his head and smiled apologetically as Xander's hand came up to rest flat against his face, under the sharp cheekbone. He covered the hand with his own.

"Sorry, luv. Don't like you calling anyone master." He bit his tongue to avoid adding "Anyone but me."

Xander considered that for a moment, and then shrugged, mentally filing his questions about the

demon away for another time. He looked into Spike's eyes again, pleased to see that they were clear blue once again. Both men dropped their hands to the table, and Xander began to speak again, carefully.

"My ... teacher is going to be in L.A. this weekend working with some of his private students. He wanted to know if I'd be interested in sparring with them. It's a big honor to be asked. I figured you and Buffy, and maybe Angel would like to play. You think Angel will care that I offered up his facilities? Martial arts schools are full of mirrors – I thought that would be a dead giveaway, pardon the pun. You interested?"

"Yeah, pet, that would be fun. And don't worry about Angel – I think he'll be game to play host. Any of these fellas as good as you?" Spike smirked.

"Some of them are better," Xander replied.

"Yeah, "Spike remarked airily, "but can they cook fried chicken?"

Part Nine

They had spent the rest of the evening packing their clothes and filling Xander's long bag with a variety of weapons to take to L.A. The phone rang several more times during the evening, with both Dawn and Willow calling to finalize small details of their trip. Dawn and Spike had a rousing argument about whether they

should drive Xander's Mercedes or Dawn's large SUV, with the SUV winning out due to the sheer volume of materials needed to keep a two-year-old safe and entertained for a week.

In another call, Willow had exacted a promise from Xander that he would be among the contingent who picked her up at the airport, saying that his was the first face she wanted to see, which prompted a tender smile from the dark man and brought a tear to his eye. She also asked about Tara's grave, and he assured her that they had delivered the lilies as promised.

The last call turned out to be Giles, calling from England to speak to Xander. Xander took the Watcher's mild chastisement while glaring at Spike for setting up the call without warning him. Xander wound up curled in one of the kitchen club chairs talking to Giles for more than an hour. Halfway through the conversation, Spike had padded into the kitchen carrying the throw blanket from the library sofa, which he had draped over Xander. Then, dropping a kiss on the top of the tousled dark hair, he had wandered off again.

After finishing the phone call, Xander had drifted back to the library, where Spike sat at the large desk, typing on a laptop computer. Xander curled up in the other desk chair and waited until Spike looked up to ask his question.

"Whatcha doin'?"

Spike looked a little embarrassed as he stripped off his glasses and began worrying the stem with his teeth again. "I'm writing my soddin' memoirs. Giles asked

me to do it." He frowned. "I'm not telling them all the good stuff, though."

Xander sat up straight. "So, you're making like Lestat and telling all the vampire adventures?"

Spike sighed. "It was the Vampire Chronicles, and it was Louis who wrote them, not Lestat and do you ever read a book?" Xander pulled a face at him and Spike shut the computer down, pushing himself away from the desk.

"You don't have to stop. I didn't mean to ..." Xander babbled. He stopped when Spike leaned across the corner of the desk to look into his eyes. Once he was sure Xander had shut up he spoke in a low, warm voice. "I can do that anytime. Right now I want to be with you." Xander flushed, but didn't break the eye contact. The vampire reached out for his hand and pulled Xander out of the chair. When they stood face to face Spike dropped the warm hand he held and lifted his fingers to run them lightly along Xander's jaw and down the side of his neck, pausing at the warm pulse point. When Xander leaned forward, a hard hand on the center of his chest stopped the motion, and the blond head shook at him in a quelling gesture. Once Xander stilled, that hand started to move, lightly tracing Xander's prominent collarbone and toying with the few dark curls that peeked out of the neck of yet another black tee shirt.

Spike licked his lips and began to speak in a low tone. "Don't have to do anything, luv. I just want to touch you." Xander felt held in place, waiting for each word to drip slowly from the vampire's lips. "You feel so good,

so warm. I can feel - I can hear the blood rushing under your skin. It sings. And you burn." The last word was a low growl, lifted with a tone of wonder. Spike continued, "When you told me that you burn for me, I - I don't know how to describe what that does to me." The blue eyes closed and Spike leaned forward to brace his forehead against the taller man's chest. He stood there for a few moments, taking and releasing unnecessary breaths. Xander lifted one hand to touch the short hair at the back of the pale neck, keeping his touch light, following Spike's lead.

After several moments of silence, Spike lifted his head, but did not make eye contact. "Xan" he said, in a quiet voice, "I have to tell you this. I haven't been with anybody since ... Buffy." Xander gasped. "But, Will, that was almost nine years ago." Spike sighed and nodded. "Yeah, I'm quite aware of that." He raised his eyes to Xander's again, his voice almost pleading. "There just wasn't anyone for me, pet. The demons all hated me since I hung out with the Slayer. The Slayer, well - that was such a rousing success - I was just dying to go back to that as well; humans were right out. Where was I to go?" He laughed mirthlessly.

Xander thought for a moment. "Why no humans?"

Blue eyes narrowed and pink lips drew back in a hard smile. "Once the chip was out, soul or no soul, I could smell the blood in them, feel it, hear it. I was out of control. Part of me roared, night and day, endlessly for their blood." Spike realized that his hands were opening and closing on the broad shoulders of the other man. He stilled them and his face softened. "It was bad, pet. Real bad. I couldn't trust myself to get

close to anyone new. I was afraid of what could happen. After a while, a long while, I got back in control; I stopped having screaming fights with myself every day, anyway. I stopped wanting to greet the sunrise every other sodding morning. But there was no one for me."

Xander saw the pain the eyes before him, the tension in the compact frame. He gently enfolded the smaller man in his arms and rubbed small circles on his back. He was glad the he could return some of the comfort Spike had given him – was it really just two nights before? Once he felt the tension starting to ease, he walked backward to the sofa and sat, pulling Spike against him, settling them so that Spike's head rested on his chest and their legs were stretched out on the leather upholstery. After a few moments he spoke quietly into the blond hair below his chin.

"Will, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I couldn't be here. I know I wouldn't have been any help, but maybe things could have been better. I hate it that you had to be so alone." He pressed a small kiss into Spike's hair. He was startled when the vampire started laughing against his chest. He slipped his fingers under Spike's chin and tilted his head up with a questioning look. Spike continued to laugh for a moment, and then grinned at Xander. "Can you believe that this was my big seduction scene, luv? I was all ready to sweep you off your bloody feet and I turn into Angel – laying on the angst."

He shook his head at himself and Xander laughed, too. "Well, I haven't exactly been Mary Sunshine myself, Will. I think I could give Deadboy Sr. a run for his

money with the piling on of the broody lately. Why don't we both take a giant step and get over ourselves? We can watch TV and bullshit then go to bed. We've got a big day ahead of us tomorrow." Spike nodded and then broke the eye contact to rest his head on Xander's chest again, listening to the slow, steady beat of his heart.

They stayed on the sofa for over four hours, changing position only to allow Xander to stretch whenever muscles cramped or circulation got cut off. They talked and told stories, taking turns sharing bits of their lives from the years since they had seen each other. Spike described some of what it was like to try and balance the soul and the demon, and Xander related his climb out of hopelessness and drug dependency. They reminisced about the exploits of the Scoobies in the old days. Xander nearly fell off the sofa with laughter when Spike told the story of Sara's birth and the havoc the whole gang had created in the hospital. In between stories, they simply relaxed. Spike's ear rarely left the spot over Xander's heart and Xander kept one hand entwined in the blond waves resting against him. Their touches were gentle and completely platonic, both men understanding the deep need to give and receive physical comfort.

Eventually, Spike lifted his head and told Xander "Sun's almost up. You ready for bed?" Xander nodded, and then stretched into a yawn causing the vampire's body to rise on his chest as he arched his back. He sat up, shifting Spike to sit at his side. They both rubbed their hands over their faces for a moment and then struggled to their feet. Xander flicked off the lamp and they wandered upstairs through the lightening gloom of

the house. At the head of the stairs, Xander turned and went into the bathroom. When he came out, he could see Spike through the door of the master bedroom, sitting on the end of his bed, smiling at him a little sadly. Without thinking too much about it, Xander looked into his own bedroom, and then back to the figure slumped across the hall. "Stay with me?" he whispered.

Before the sound was even completely out of his mouth, the vampire was beside him. Xander smiled and took the cool hand in his own, tugging Spike toward the bed. He released the other man and they both climbed into the large, soft bed. They lay side by side for a moment, not touching. Turning his head to the side, Xander lifted his arm, smiling as the soft blond hair brushed his chest and the cool ear settled over his heart. A leg tangled with his and he settled his hands on Spike's back, rubbing circles over the smooth, soft skin.

Hours later Xander drifted awake. Realizing where he was, he resettled the sleeping form against his chest, pulling the smaller man more on top of him and stretching his cramped arm. Spike's hand came up to rest on his bicep, and two fingers scratched lightly at the inside of his elbow. The soothing motion sent Xander back to sleep almost instantly.

Xander's hands flowed through long, silken hair. He wrapped it around and around his fists and pulled back on it gently. Huge green eyes opened languidly to stare into his. He braced all of his weight on his elbows – she was so tiny; he couldn't crush her. Her body shifted under his, her hips rising to meet his hardness and brush her lower body against it. One of her legs came up to curl around his hip and intensify the contact. He dragged his tongue up the long column of her neck, leaving a shiny trail on the honey-colored skin. He licked and sucked at the spot where her neck met her shoulder, and then nibbled down to her prominent collarbone.

He gently extricated his hands from her hair and moved down her body, kissing a path between her breasts, and his hands closed on the outer curves of their fullness. Her nipples were tiny peaks; he captured first one and then the other with his mouth, drawing delicate gasps and moans from her mouth. He kissed his way down to her still-flat belly. Once there he paused, knowing that this flesh sheltered his child – their child. He pressed his ear to her abdomen, knowing there was nothing to hear yet, but wanting the contact just the same.

He closed his hands on her narrow hips, preparing to move even lower, when her body was pulled from under his in one strong jerk. He reached for her with a shout, hearing only her scream as she was pulled away. She was being held against the wall in the shadows, by a shadow. He couldn't move, couldn't go to her. A long, thin white hand tipped with plum-colored fingernails reached across her body and drew back, one long talon slashing across the throat he had

lovingly kissed only seconds earlier. Dark blood cascaded down the honeyed skin.

Xander screamed.

Spike heard the shout from the library, where he was working at the computer. He was on his feet and halfway up the stairs when the scream rent the air. When he opened the door to the guestroom he saw Xander backed up against the headboard, unseeing eyes wide open, reaching out to the corner of the room. The scream had tapered off and he was repeating the word "no" in a stricken voice. Spike could barely hear that quiet, desperate whisper over the frantic pounding of Xander's heart. He could tell that the other man was not yet awake, caught in the claws of some horrible nightmare.

He moved into the room slowly, trying not to startle the frightened figure on the bed. When the mattress dipped slightly under his weight, the dark head swiveled toward him and the brown eyes cleared. "Oh God, Will," Xander moaned, diving for the vampire. Spike cradled the larger man in his arms, feeling the cold, slick sweat that covered his body and matted his hair. The smell of Xander's fear was almost overpowering. He rubbed circles on the heaving back and crooned wordless sounds of comfort until the shaking body stilled and Xander sat up, rubbing his hands over his face. Spike's heart broke a little when the other man tried to muster up a smile under haunted eyes and failed miserably.

Xander drew in a deep breath and let it out as a sigh. "Well," he said, "that's got to be among the worst ways

to wake up ever. Did you hear me from downstairs?" Spike nodded and said, "Bat ears," just so he could see his friend smile a little. This smile had a bit more power and was creeping toward the dark eyes. "Why don't you go get a shower?" he continued, "And I'll see if I can get us some food going. Sundown's in about an hour. Little Bit will be here soon."

Xander nodded and slid to the side of the bed to place his feet on the floor. He glanced at the blond. "Thanks for running in here to my rescue, Will. Don't be too freaked, but I have nightmares sometimes. Loud ones, as I'm sure you noticed." Spike's lips twisted into something like a grin as he replied, "Join the club, pet." Xander nodded and went to take a shower.

Part Eleven

Packing the huge SUV had taken over an hour. Xander marveled at all of the stuff they were carrying. It looked like a baby superstore had been dropped into the truck's cargo area. They'd had to rearrange it twice to fit in the long weapons bag, Xander and Spike's two medium sized duffels and the cooler that held the vampire's blood supply. Dawn had argued that Angel could furnish the blood, but Spike had refused on the basis that the last time he'd visited Angel's hotel the house vintage had been "soddin' crap in a plastic bag" and he wasn't going to suffer with that for a week. Dawn had given in eventually.

They'd been underway for about thirty minutes when a whine split the air. "Can we listen to something else? I really hate this music." Xander covered his smirk with his hand as he pushed Spike's shoulder, reaching over the top of Sara's car seat to do so. Spike kicked him in

the ankle and whined, "Are we there yet, Mom?" He smothered a smirk of his own. Sara looked from one man to the other and then decided to get into the act, merrily flinging Goldfish crackers between the seats at her mother and father. Jase lightly banged his head on the steering wheel and Dawn tried to reprimand Spike, Xander and her daughter at the same time.

She turned to her husband and demanded, "See, Jase? And you want more kids? We'd go insane." He grinned back at her. "I'm starting to see the merits of population control now." He raised his voice so the two hooligans in the backseat were sure to hear him. "If you boys can't behave, we're going to have to play Dawn's Horrifying Music in the Car Game." Spike's eyes got huge and he shook his head at Xander emphatically. Xander raised an eyebrow and stuck his head between the front seats. "What on earth is Dawn's Horrifying Music in the Car Game? Ow!" He jerked his head back as Spike thumped him smartly on the ear.

"What?" he asked the unapologetic vampire. Spike gave him an exasperated look. "What is with you people? You were born on the Hellmouth and you don't know any better than to ask stupid questions about something already clearly labeled as horrifying? Git." Xander asked quietly, "Why is it horrifying?" Spike whispered back, "She makes everybody sing, that's why. Idiot." Spike crossed his arms over his chest and sat back in his seat with a frown. "Oh," Xander said in a small voice. "Who gets to pick the songs?" Spike scowled at him. "She does, mostly. And I am not singing 'White Wedding', Dawn." This was directed at the front seat. Dawn looked over her seat with a gleam

in her eye. “‘Rebel Yell’ then?”

“No.”

“‘Mony Mony’?”

“No way.”

“I got it. ” She held up a CD. “‘Rock the Cradle of Love’. Come on, Spike – you know you want to. You’re a complete sucker for the Billy Idol oldies.”

Spike snorted, but didn’t deny her accusation. “Hmpf. Well, I’m not going first, Bit.” He tried to maintain his glare, but the corners of his mouth twitched slightly. “It’s your game; you should have to go first.”

“No,” she replied. “We have to do a group number first.”

Xander broke in. “Didn’t I already cause something like this with that singing, dancing, burning-up-from-the-inside demon?”

Spike gave him a direct look. “Oh, yes, you did, whelp. Did I ever thank you properly for that? I sang to Buffy, you know. Very heartfelt; very humiliating. Thanks tons, luv. It was great.”

Xander touched the top of his shoulder and said with a teasing tone, “Don’t be bitter, baby.” He noticed Spike’s eyebrows rise and his eyes widen. Hmmmm, he thought. The vampire likes to be called “baby”. File that away for future use.

Dawn squealed and opened a CD case. "OK, Xander – if you don't know this one it's a crime. It was old when you were in high school." Xander smiled when the opening notes of Billy Joel's "You May Be Right" thundered out of the stereo. He laughed out loud when everyone in the car launched into the song, with little Sara babbling along. Xander could hear Dawn's high voice over everyone, and he remembered Spike's surprisingly good, growly tenor. He leaned forward slightly and was floored to hear a deep, basso profundo voice rolling out of Jase. Dawn caught his expression and shrugged at him as if to say, "go figure". Xander stopped caring what he or the others sounded like and applied his perfectly adequate singing voice to the chorus.

"You may be right
I may be crazy
But it just may be a lunatic you're looking for
Turn out the light
Don't try to save me
You may be wrong for all I know
But you may be right"

The song ended and they all laughed as Sara clapped her chubby little hands and cried out "Again, again!" Jase opted to go next and sang a slow country ballad that Xander had never heard before to his wife. Xander thought Jase's voice was much better than the guy on the CD's and told him so. Jase ducked his head shyly at the compliment. Dawn went next, and sang a Sara McLaughlin song that was suited to her high range. Once she finished she changed the CD and the driving beat of "Rock the Cradle of Love" started. Xander watched Spike in the darkness, wishing he had the

vampire's night vision.

Spike's voice wrapped around the words of the song and he easily hit every note. The sensual growl in his tone was making Xander feel soft and squishy inside when the blue eyes turned to him and Spike sang the last part of the song directly to him. He smirked at Xander as he finished up and then immediately started badgering the other man to pick a song. Xander held up his hands in mock surrender. "I have one, hang on a sec." He twisted around in his seat and reached for the CD case he had transferred from the Mercedes to the SUV on impulse. He passed a disc to Dawn and asked her to cue up track 7. As the simple guitar notes started he told the others, "You'll have to chime in on the chorus."

As soon as Xander started singing, the others started laughing. His chosen song was a slow, partially rapped version of Gordon Lightfoot's "Sundown". Xander knew the rap by heart, and as soon as the chorus started the others chimed in.

"Sundown you better take care
If I find you been creeping round my back stair
Sometimes I think it's a shame
When I get feeling better
When I'm feeling no pain"

When the song ended they all laughed themselves breathless, and Jase begged Dawn to play the song again, and Xander to sing it again. They both complied, and the whole group sang the song again. They took a break while Dawn searched for another group sing, and Xander turned to Spike.

"You have a nice singing voice," he remarked. "I like it." Spike smiled and ducked his head a little.

"Thanks, luv. Many decades of practice. Yours isn't too bad, either – I really liked your song." Xander returned the smile. "It just struck me the first time I heard it – made me laugh, so I kept it." Spike's smile turned wistful. "So, if I make you laugh, are you going to keep me?" he asked, too softly for the others to hear. Xander put his arm along the back of the seat and tugged lightly at the blond hair until blue eyes met brown ones in the gloom. He traced his fingers along the shell of Spike's ear for a moment and replied, his voice husky. "I think that could be arranged." He watched as Spike's tongue darted out to moisten his lips and wished like hell that they were alone.

"Oh." They both turned toward the soft sound to find Dawn looking at them from the front seat, her eyes huge. She quickly shut her mouth, which had been hanging open, and said, "Sara's asleep, so no more singing for a while." She tried to hide her brilliant smile as she turned back around to the front of the car. She rummaged in her CD case for a while and chose a CD that she knew contained moody, atmospheric, romantic songs. She slid it into the player, happy to be contributing a little to what she hoped she was seeing. Her hand stole out to clasp her husband's where it rested on his thigh.

The fingers that had been tracing against the inside of Xander's elbow moved up to encircle his bicep and squeeze. "We're here, pet," Spike whispered. Xander had fallen asleep shortly after Sara. He had started to

struggle a bit in his sleep, so Spike had started rubbing soothing circles on his arm, which had remained draped over the seat back. He'd calmed, and Spike had kept up the contact for the rest of the trip.

The car was sitting in a front space in an underground parking garage. Xander assumed it was attached to Angel's hotel, the Chanticleer. Angel had moved his business several times after the destruction of the Hyperion, but had eventually realized he liked the hotel setup. The Chanticleer was a restored Art Deco hotel in an old section of L.A. Xander stepped out of the SUV and stretched, then smiled while he watched Spike deftly wrestle Sara out of her car seat without waking her. He settled her against his shoulder and shut the car door softly. Dawn opened the cargo area and they grabbed as much of the luggage as they could carry. They walked to a set of glass doors and Dawn punched a code into a security keypad. The doors slid back and a computerized voice said, "Welcome to the Chanticleer." They stepped in and proceeded to an elevator located directly in front of them. A bell chimed as the car arrived, and Sara stirred. Spike traded the waking girl to Dawn for the duffel and diaper bag she carried as they boarded the elevator.

Xander took in a large breath and let it out slowly. Spike leaned against him and whispered in his ear. "No big deal, luv – it's just the same old gang." Xander bent slightly to rest his head against the blond waves. The elevator doors opened and they were attacked.

Part Twelve

Buffy jumped at Xander and he dropped his bags to catch her. Over her shoulder he saw Angel greeting Spike with a big smile and a handshake. As he placed Buffy back on her feet he was blindsided by a petite brunette. "Cordelia?" He hugged her tightly as Buffy intercepted her sister and brother-in-law for more hugs. Two small dark-haired children were peeking out from behind a sofa in the ornate lobby. As soon as Sara had been set on her feet they ran out to greet her. They looked very much alike and Xander guessed that they were four years old or so. Cordelia gestured toward them with a laugh. "Those little hellions are Jack and Lily. They're mine." Her eyes glowed with pride. Xander grabbed her hands and held them wide, as he ran a suggestive glance up and down her body. "I never would have guessed it, Cordy. You look great." She blushed happily, and then pulled her hand free to shake a teasing finger at him. "This figure took a ton of work, Xander Harris, and don't you forget it. Twins are hell on your waistline." She spun away to greet the others and Xander found himself face to face with Angel.

Angel, of course, looked exactly the same. A small smile played at the corners of his mouth as he held a hand out to Xander. Xander took it and they smiled at one another. "Hey, man," Xander said. "Hey," Angel repeated. Distracted, the large vampire looked down. Sara was tugging at his dark pants. "Up, Angel," she said. He lifted her and buried his face in her hair to kiss her neck. She squealed and pulled back, and Xander

saw the huge smile lighting Angel's face, reaching all the way to his eyes. So that's what Buffy sees in him, he thought. Sara turned away from her uncle and held out her small hand. Xander placed his finger in it and was enchanted when she said "Bander" and then kissed his finger. His eyes met Angel's and his old nemesis shrugged. "Well, if Sara approves of you ..." his voice trailed off and the two men laughed together easily.

The rest of the gear was retrieved from the car and carried to another set of elevators. Dawn danced up and distributed room keys, smiling to herself as she gave Spike and Xander theirs. Cordelia corralled the children as the others boarded the elevator to go to their rooms, with Buffy and Angel providing extra muscle for Dawn and Jase's luggage.

The elevator opened on the fourth floor and Jase, Dawn, Buffy and Angel exited. Over her shoulder Buffy said, "Go settle in. We'll meet in the lobby in an hour to leave for the airport, OK?" Spike and Xander nodded as the elevator doors slipped closed. As the car climbed to the fifth floor, Xander looked down at the tag attached to his key. It was a metal oval with a raised carving of a rooster on it. Beneath the rooster was the number 501. He glanced at Spike's tag and laughed. "What's so funny, mate?" the vampire asked with a raised eyebrow. Xander held out his key. "I think Dawnie's doing a little matchmaking." Spike held out his key. They were both to room 501. Spike merely raised his eyebrow a little higher. "You OK with that?" he asked. In answer, Xander leaned over and kissed him. It was an affectionate brush of lips with a promise of things to come. The doors slid open at the fifth floor.

Room 501 turned out to be a large two-bedroom suite. It had a sweeping view of downtown L.A. and very heavy drapes. The suite was set up with a central parlor which included seating, a wet bar and a large entertainment center. The two bedrooms were identical. Each had a king-sized bed, a large armoire with a television, a complete sound system and a small sitting area. Each also had a palatial bathroom with claw-footed tubs and walk-in showers. All of the rooms were richly decorated and appointed. Xander placed his duffel on the bed in one of the rooms and unpacked his belongings. Spike knocked on the door as he was finishing up. Xander invited him in. Spike prowled around, checking out the bathroom, and then came to stand at his friend's side at the open closet. He ran a finger down the row of Xander's neatly hung clothes, all black.

Xander flushed a little at the scrutiny and started to stammer. "It's, well ... I just ..." His voice trailed off when Spike met his eyes with an understanding look and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Xan, I'm an actual Victorian, remember. We invented the concept of wearing mourning. It's OK. It's ... good – that you choose to remember her that way." Xander dipped his head in the gesture that was becoming second nature to him and pressed his forehead against Spike's. After a moment they broke the pose, and Xander closed the closet door.

"Well, we've got the better part of an hour. What do you want to do?" Xander asked, and immediately laughed when Spike gave him an exaggerated leer. "Besides that," he added. He rubbed his hands over his face and grimaced. "I better shave, so I don't rub a

hole in Willow when I hug her.” He saw Spike’s expression brighten and asked, “You wanna watch, baby?” in a light, teasing tone. He was rewarded with that same flash of heat he’d seen when he had called Spike “baby” in the car. He pulled his shaving kit out of his bag and walked to the bathroom, Spike following close behind.

Spike sat perched on the edge of the claw-footed bathtub and watched as Xander stripped off his black tee shirt and turned the water on in the sink. While the other man unpacked shaving supplies and tested the water’s heat, the vampire took the opportunity to ogle his body in peace. Xander was barefoot, which Spike had noticed seemed to be his natural state. As soon as they’d come upstairs Xander’s shoes and socks had been history. Moving his eyes up the tall body, Spike admired the tight black jeans, and especially admired the form beneath them. Xander has strong calves and thighs that filled the jeans well, but the good stuff was just above; the boy had a fantastic ass. Having seen it in just boxer briefs, Spike had been impressed. The low waist of the jeans hugged Xander’s hips, and as he turned slightly, Spike could see where the dark arrow of hair on Xander’s chest slipped below the button fly. Xander’s waist was narrow, which only emphasized the breadth of his back and shoulders. His back and shoulders flexed as he started spreading shaving cream carefully over his face and neck. The muscles in his shoulders bunched as he smoothed his shaggy hair away from the white foam. The back of his neck was hidden by the sable waves. Spike loved his hair this long; it looked wild and made the boy look like some sort of debauched cherub.

Spike shifted position so he could see Xander's face in the mirror. He began to draw the razor down his cheeks, making funny faces to smooth the skin for optimal closeness, rinsing the razor periodically in the sink. He worked his way down, shaving his upper lip, then his chin. He carefully evened off the bottoms of his short sideburns and then tilted his head back to work on the strong column of his throat. He shaved the tanned skin in long strokes, and then returned to the area under his jaw to clean up any stray whiskers. Once finished, he rinsed the razor a final time, and then bent to rinse his face. He pulled his head out of the sink and dried his face and neck with the hand towel.

Xander turned and smiled at the vampire who'd been watching him so intently. He gestured to his face. "You want to come check my work?" he asked. Spike was instantly at his side, running his fingertips over the sleek planes of freshly shorn flesh. As he circled under Xander's jaw, he hit a rough patch. "You missed a spot, pet," his voice was husky, as he was almost painfully aroused from watching Xander do this mundane task. The dark man picked up the razor and ran it over the spot, wincing as he nicked himself. "Ouch!" he hissed, rubbing the small spot of blood with the towel.

The smell of Xander's blood hit Spike like a freight train. His eyes widened, and he couldn't stop himself from scenting the air lightly to capture just a little more of that intoxicating aroma. He licked his finger and held it out to Xander. "Here, vampire spit'll close the cut – semi-gross, but true." Xander looked at him for a moment, and then kissed the tip of the proffered finger. He placed his hand on Spike's shoulder. "How

about you give me a little of that right from the tap?" It took Spike a moment to understand that Xander was offering to let him lick the tiny wound. His mouth dropped open and he shut it with a snap. He stepped forward and placed his lips against the warm flesh of the boy's neck. He ran his tongue lightly over the cut and both men moaned. Spike fought the urge to draw on the nick and simply ran his tongue over it one more time. Gripping Xander's arm, he pushed himself back a step.

Xander looked at him quizzically. "What does it taste like?" he asked softly. Spike unconsciously ran his tongue over his lips and considered the question, still savoring the small taste. "Tastes like you, luv. Just like you smell and your skin tastes, like the inside of your mouth tastes, just more intense, hotter, wilder ... more," he hesitated. "Just - more," he finished. His blue eyes glittered into Xander's dark ones. "I'm glad you like the way I taste." Xander said, with a small smile. "Is it different from the bagged stuff?" Spike didn't drop the eye contact, but his eyes glittered even more. "It's a world away. Your blood is alive. It's you." As he spoke, he closed the distance between them. "I think we're done with questions," he growled as he pushed Xander back against the sink and brought their lower bodies into contact. Xander gasped as Spike's erection pressed against him. In their previous encounters he had marveled at the tensile strength of the vampire's body, but this was different. Spike was beyond hard, his flesh crushed against Xander's with bruising pressure.

Spike moved his hips enough to slide against the human's hardening length and leaned his head forward

to lick the healed spot on Xander's neck with one long, wet stroke that ended just below a flushed ear. Tanned hands came up and tangled into blond waves, gently at first, then with urgency and their lips met in a rough, hard kiss. Mouths opened, tongues fought and teeth clashed as they tried to devour each other. Spike's hands closed on the hips before him and he started pressing their groins together in a rhythm he echoed with the thrusts of his tongue. The bathroom was filled with groans and growls. Xander freed one hand to curl over the vampire's hip and grip his hard backside. Spike could tell that the human needed air, but was reluctant to break the passionate embrace. He finally gathered what was left of his wits and wrenched their mouths apart. Xander panted breathlessly against him.

Taking a deep breath of his own, Spike stepped back. The hand on his ass tightened to keep him in place, and wide brown eyes met his. "Not trying to be a tease, pet, but we have to go to the airport and get Willow, and you haven't told your story, and I'm not wasting our first time against the bathroom sink. OK?" Xander replied "yes" but shook his head "no" at the same time. They shared a laugh and put a little bit of space between them. Spike took another step back and said, "We'd better get showers. Angel will smell us all over each other, and I don't really feel like answering the questions just yet." He took one more step back, fighting the urge to grab the boy again and ravish his kiss-swollen lips.

Xander glanced down at the bulge straining the front of his own jeans. "I guess I do have something I need to take care of in the shower." He smiled ruefully, and

then laughed as Spike gave him a dirty look. "What?" he asked. "You're evil, mate. You didn't have to tell me that." Xander looked down pointedly, "I don't think it's a secret," he groused. "Now get out of here, since I can't have you yet." Spike turned with a smile and left the room.

Both men took longer in the shower than usual.

Part Thirteen

Everyone met in the lobby, and it was decided that Buffy, Angel, Spike and Xander would take the SUV to the airport to pick up Willow. Dawn carefully handed the keys to her sister, even though Spike made a grab for them. She laughed at his scowl. Knowing that Xander would be wearing black, and wanting to save the human from any smart remarks from Buffy about matching clothes, Spike had pulled on a pair of faded jeans and a thin gray sweater that clung to his sculpted chest. He'd even forgone the gel in his hair; soft waves fell over his forehead. Xander was indeed in his usual black jeans, but he'd dressed them up with a black silk long sleeved pullover. He'd pushed the sleeves to his elbows and his hair was still damp. Spike wanted to throw him on one of the sofas in the lobby and make him scream.

Buffy was wearing jeans and a simple white top. Xander stood back and looked at his old friend. She'd changed so much since the last time he'd seen her.

She was softer, less angular. She'd put on some much-needed weight, and Xander thought she looked healthy and happy. Angel was wearing his usual deep colors, and he looked happy, too. They both looked trim and athletic and ready to kick some ass. Cordelia, Dawn and Jase promised to get the kids to bed and ready a room for Willow while they were gone. The children had all fallen asleep on the lobby sofas, and only needed to be moved upstairs.

They said their goodbyes and trooped out to the parking deck. Buffy and Angel settled in the front while Spike disconnected Sara's car seat and placed it in the cargo area to make more room in the back seat. He slammed the tailgate and slid into the backseat next to Xander, making sure that their thighs were pressed together from knee to hip. A smile twisted his lips as the other man automatically curled his fingers around the blue denim-clad leg next to his own.

The trip to the airport was fairly quick, and soon they were parking at the terminal. Buffy led the three men through the concourse expertly, and they followed along, Xander bracketed between the two vampires. The three of them talked and joked easily and they stepped quickly to keep up with Buffy's pace. She still reached the gate several minutes before them and stood, tapping her toe impatiently. When they reached her, Xander put his arm around her shoulder and rubbed his hand up and down her arm. "Antsy much?" He asked her. She leaned her head against his arm. "I'm just excited. I haven't seen Willow in way too long." They shared a smile as they waited for their friend.

Within a couple of minutes, passengers started pouring through the gate's doorway. Buffy bounced up and down, trying to see her friend. Xander craned his neck and finally spotted her titian hair. "Willow!" he called, "over here!" She turned toward them, and Xander and Buffy rushed forward to enfold the petite witch in a smothering embrace. Both girls squealed, and Xander laughed out loud. The two vampires stood back and shared a smile at the friends' antics. They both snorted, "Humans." The trio finally broke their embrace and all started talking at once.

Angel stepped up to them and placed one huge hand on Willow's shoulder. She turned, and her face lit up. She jumped up, and Angel lifted her off the ground in a hug as she kissed him soundly on the cheek. He placed her back on her feet in front of Spike. She gave him a sweet smile, as well as a hug and a kiss. They exchanged quiet hellos, and another hug. Willow had been instrumental in helping Spike after the return of his soul, and they had a special friendship. She raised her hand to his hair and said, "I like you with the natural look." He smiled and tugged on a lock of her hair, which was trimmed into a choppy, face-framing style that made her look like a pixie. "You look good, too, Red."

"Well, we better go get the luggage," Angel suggested. "I'll carry this one," Xander said, and scooped Willow up in a fireman's carry with her head hanging down his back. She squealed and struggled as he walked down the concourse. The other three laughed and followed.

Buffy, Xander and Willow talked the entire way home, with Angel and Spike interjecting an occasional word

into the verbal fray, but mostly just enjoying the show. The drive passed quickly, and soon they arrived back at the Chanticleer. Willow marveled at the architecture, earning a smile from Angel. Spike and Angel argued good-naturedly about which of them got to carry Willow's luggage as they all swept in through the glass doors and up to the main lobby. There was another flurry of greetings as Cordelia and Dawn hugged Willow. Dawn explained that Jase had volunteered to keep an ear on the kids while Xander finished his story for the others. Dawn and Buffy swept Willow away to find her room, and Angel and Cordelia went to the kitchen to get drinks for everyone.

Xander walked to a corner of the lobby and pulled a heavy drape aside to stare out into the street. After watching silently for a moment, Spike joined him. He stopped a few feet behind Xander and waited. Xander turned and held out his arm. The vampire moved to his side and threaded his hand around the taller man's waist to rest on his hip, and nestled his head into the broad shoulder. Xander concentrated on keeping his breaths steady as his panic rose. He whispered against the top of Spike's head, "I don't want to do this." "I know, luv," Spike crooned. "It's not gonna be easy, but you've got to get it off your chest. I promise everything is gonna be all right." Xander's only answer was another wavering breath, and Spike could tell that his control was slipping. He stepped in front of his friend and placed both hands on his shoulders, looking directly into his shadowed dark eyes. Xander lost himself for a moment in the crystal blue depths, and then shook himself slightly.

"I can do this. I can do this," he repeated, almost to

himself. To Spike he said, "I need to go upstairs. I need the photo album. Will you go with me?" Spike nodded and they walked slowly to the elevator. The car arrived, and the three girls spilled out. Xander smiled at them and said, "I need something from the room – we'll be right back." They traded places and the girls moved into the lobby. As soon as the elevator doors closed, Xander found Spike's lips on his in the gentlest kiss he'd ever been given. In that soft, sweet touch the vampire poured out the affection he felt for the boy, the sorrow of time lost, the pain of years and the comfort he offered. Xander felt tears well up in his eyes, as he understood everything his friend was trying to say without words, and he couldn't help but to hope that those feelings would survive the terrible truth he was about to tell. He returned the kiss and let the tears fall.

Spike tasted salt, and knew that it was Xander's tears. Lifting his lips from the full, warm ones of the human; he used his thumbs to wipe away the moisture. He then pressed light kisses all over Xander's face. When the elevator stopped, Spike took Xander's hand and led him to their door, waiting outside as Xander gathered his book and took a moment to regain his composure. They rode back down the elevator in silence, and their hands were clasped again as they exited into the lobby. Their friends were all arrayed around a low table situated in front of the hotel's massive fireplace, sipping drinks and waiting quietly.

As they joined the group, Spike took the black book out of Xander's hand and gave it to Dawn. He had to clear his throat to speak. "Little Bit? Why don't you tell as much of the story as Xan's already told us? We're going

to go over there and" His voice trailed off and he made a vague hand gesture. Dawn nodded, and Spike led an unresisting Xander back to the window. Once there, he moved to face the taller man and pulled him into an embrace, resting their brows together and putting his hand on the back of Xander's neck. He knew that Xander was barely hanging on; he could feel fear and anger and dread and terrible sadness coming off of the man in waves. After a moment, a strong hand gripped his neck below the platinum waves.

Spike and Xander could easily hear Dawn's voice as she relayed the stories she'd heard from Xander. Everyone laughed appreciatively at Xander's mug shot and the photo of him getting his ass kicked by tiny Shari. Xander knew when they had reached the black and white portraits when he heard Willow make a tiny sound and say in a cracking voice, "They're so beautiful – both of them." He knew instinctively when they had turned the last page, and shut his eyes against the pain. Spike's hand tightened on his neck and the pressure of the forehead against his increased. Xander finally turned back to the group when he heard the completely unexpected sound of Cordelia bursting into tears.

Xander broke from Spike and moved to her side. She had her hands over her face, and he could hear her gasping sobs. Xander sat next to her and pulled her into his lap. He easily enfolded her small body in his arms, and rubbed soothing circles on her back. She buried her head in his shoulder and cried for a few moments. Eventually her sobs eased, and she gratefully took the handkerchief that Angel passed to her. Once she had wiped her face, she gave Xander a

tiny, watery smile. "I'm sorry, you guys – I guess it's just a Mommy thing." She and Dawn exchanged a knowing look; Dawn also had tears in her eyes and both of her hands were clutching one of Spike's in a crushing grip. Cordelia met Xander's eyes fully. "I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am, Xander. You don't deserve this kind of pain. If I could make it go away, I would." The others echoed her sentiments, and Xander felt several hands reach out to pat him or clasp his hand or knee.

Xander settled Cordelia next to him on the sofa, and looked around the group, meeting each set of eyes but lingering on Spike's beautiful blue ones the longest. He took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. "It - Oh, God, it gets worse, guys. I know who murdered my wife and child. I came here because I need you to help me kill that person." He looked directly at Spike and braced himself. "It was Drusilla."

Part Fourteen

The girls all exploded into speech, asking questions and exclaiming in disbelief. Xander ignored them; all he could see was the stricken look in Spike's eyes, which slowly slipped away from his to focus on the inlaid marble floor. Xander saw Angel lay his hand on Spike's slumped shoulder, and saw Spike turn to the larger vampire, still not looking up. Buffy moved to stand before Xander, interrupting his line of sight to Spike. She placed her small, soft hands on his arm. "I'll kill

her for you, Xander, any day, any time." Her voice was full of suppressed fury. Xander met her glittering green eyes and opened his mouth to reply. Before the words could pass his lips, a hard voice came from behind her. "No, you won't, Slayer," Spike said. "Her death belongs to Xander. It's his right."

They all settled back into their seats, and Angel came to sit on the low table directly in front of Xander. With a delicacy that Xander could hardly believe, the vampire took one of Xander's hands into his huge one and questioned him gently and thoroughly about the murder and his suspicions of Dru's involvement. Buffy sat on one side of Xander, Dawn on the other, each with their arm looped through his. Cordelia and Willow sat on the floor on either side of his legs, and Spike came to stand behind the sofa, hovering but not touching. Xander had never felt as safe and loved as he did at that moment. He reveled in those warm, supportive touches as he answered Angel's careful questions and relived the worst night of his life.

< FLASHBACK >

Class had run a little long, because they'd been having so much fun sparring. Everyone was drenched in sweat and laughing and joking as they walked out to their cars in the sultry southern night. Xander stopped by his car and stripped off his belt and uniform top, enjoying the relative coolness of just his uniform pants and black tank top. He threw the sweaty garments into the back seat, making a mental note to be sure to carry them into the house before the Mercedes started smelling like a locker room again; Shari hated that. Xander stretched and rolled his shoulders for a few

minutes before getting into his car. He waved to his friends and students as their cars pulled out of the parking lot. He propped one foot on the car's bumper and leaned down to stretch the hamstring that had been giving him a little trouble.

As he straightened, a chill ran up his back, making the hair on his neck stand up. For an instant he was back on the Hellmouth, fifteen years old and facing some immortal evil with a sharp stick and false bravado. He even reached back, for a pocket that neither existed nor held a stake. He raised his head and looked around carefully. The parking lot was mostly empty of cars; all of the storefronts were closed for the night. Xander shook off the feeling and slid behind the wheel. Just before he shut the door, he thought he heard a tinkling laugh drift over the roofs of the buildings.

He drove home, singing along with the radio. On a weeknight, this late, the suburban area he called home was tranquil. The neighborhood had streetlights and sidewalks, and the houses were nicely kept, sitting back on manicured lawns. Welcoming yellow light shone out at him from his porch. He hit the remote to open the garage door, and slid the Mercedes into the garage alongside Shari's sporty little Mazda. He entered the house quietly. Since she was so late in her pregnancy, Shari had started going to bed earlier and earlier; she said she was getting her last sleep for a while.

Xander walked into the laundry room and stripped off the remainder of his uniform, berating himself for having left the top in the car. Deciding not to go back for it, he padded upstairs naked, rubbing his hand

through his hair, where the sweat was beginning to dry. He stopped in the guest bathroom to shower so he wouldn't wake his sleeping wife. Once finished, he rubbed his hair with a towel and stepped across the hall to the room that had been decorated as baby Lex's nursery.

They had argued about the name, but Shari was adamant that their son would be named for his father. Xander had objected to the baby being also called Xander, and Shari had vetoed Alex. They had finally decided on Lex. Standing by the crib, Xander ran his fingers over the soft sheet and tiny blanket. The crib was full of stuffed toys, and Xander picked up several of them; a giraffe, a dog, a duck and what he swore was a platypus, but Shari said was a beaver. He placed the toys back on the covers and turned to enter the master bedroom, turning off the hall light. He felt his way to the bed and lifted the covers. He slid into the bed and inched toward his wife, hoping to snuggle into her warmth. She was cold. It took his mind a long, horrible second to realize what that meant. She was cold.

Xander leapt from the bed and tried to turn on the lamp. It was gone. He found it with his foot a second later, not even registering the pain as the smashed ceramic shards cut deep into his foot. He stumbled to the window and pulled up the blinds to let the glow from the streetlight in. He realized that the window was open. He turned back to the bed and pulled Shari to him. As he dragged her into his arms, her head fell back. It fell back too far, and he saw the long slash on her throat from ear to ear. He put his hand over it to try and close the horrible wound. It gaped at him like

an obscene smile. He ran his hands over her still face, trying to find any little bit of warmth or life. There was none. There was also no blood.

Fear washed over Xander like an icy rain as he held his wife's lifeless, bloodless body against him for a long minute, sweeping his hand over her face and down to cup her distended abdomen, where he knew Lex was still. Then he placed her reverently on the bed and covered her with the blanket. He stepped to the window and looked down. From under the streetlight a pale face looked up at his. Her eyes were huge and dark and a small smile played about her lips. Her hair curled down from her widow's peak to the shoulders of her velvet dress. As she looked at him she raised a blood-streaked hand to her mouth and licked it. By the time he reached the street, she was gone.

He'd gone in and put on some sweat pants and called 911. He sat on the porch steps until the police and ambulance arrived. The paramedics had rushed up to the bedroom, only to come back down much more slowly, carrying her plastic-draped body gently on a stretcher. One of them had noticed the blood and had removed the pieces of ceramic imbedded in his foot and bandaged the cut, telling him he would need stitches. Without a word Xander had shrugged on a sweatshirt and hobbled to the back door of the ambulance. He had climbed in and sat next to Shari's stretcher silently, his hand tucked under her, between the body bag and the stretcher.

There were questions and stitches and phone calls, then hands touching him and trying to comfort him. Family and friends had surrounded him, sharing hugs

and tears and shocked exclamations. He had gone home with Shari's parents and taken whatever pills the doctor had prescribed. Within three days, he had laid his wife and child to rest. Within three weeks, the police had told him they were baffled; they had no leads and no ideas. He returned home for one night, but was unable to sleep and spent the entire night sitting on the porch steps, hoping that the dark demon that had killed Shari and Lex would come and take him too.

The next day, Xander put the house on the market. It sold within a few weeks. He stayed with various friends, and sometimes in hotels. He went to work and to the dojo, where he worked out and taught his classes. The entire school mourned Shari as one of their own, so everyone pretended not to notice if he was fighting too hard in sparring matches; in fact, some of the larger men purposely partnered up with him to provide him something solid to pound out his grief and rage and pain on. He sometimes had to leave class quickly, when the tears threatened to overwhelm him, and no one commented other than to offer sad smiles.

At night, he hunted. He started carrying a stake and a cross with him everywhere. His Sunnydale wariness returned, and he used it to his advantage, stalking his prey on the streets near his house, and further afield – anywhere he could dig up a whisper of innuendo even containing the word vampire. He stalked and killed eleven vampires, none of them the one he wanted. By the time Shari had been gone six months he knew what he had to do. If there was anyone in the world who could find Dru, it was Spike. Despite the

estrangement between the former lovers, Xander believed that Spike could find her. But, would Spike help him? He knew he'd been awful to the vampire in the past. They'd had their moments of camaraderie, but Xander knew he could not expect Spike to receive him as a friend.

In desperation, he'd broken his silence of eight years and tracked Willow down at her teaching job in Canada. He'd asked her point blank to tell him where Spike was. She's acquiesced, and he had gotten into his car that afternoon and begun the drive across the country that would place him on Spike's doorstep.

< END FLASHBACK >

Xander finished his story and released Angel's hand. He slumped back against the sofa, and felt Spike's hands close on his shoulders. He tilted his head back to look at the vampire, and was stunned by the look in the blue eyes. There was pain and anger and sadness and something softer – compassion? Affection? Spike leaned down and brushed his lips across the man's forehead. He clasped the shoulders under his hands hard, and then let go. Dawn handed Xander a glass of water and a handkerchief. Once he'd wiped his eyes and drunk his water, Xander saw that the two vampires had moved away from the group to talk quietly.

As if by silent agreement, the girls gathered around Xander on the sofa and talked to him about inconsequential things – they shared old stories and talked about their lives and didn't care that Xander was only half-listening. He was grateful that there always seemed to be a soft hand in his, and that Buffy and

Willow were taking turns rubbing his shoulders or stroking his cheek. At one point or another in the conversation, each girl said, "I love you" to Xander, and returned his small, sad smile. Eventually, they stopped talking and simply sat, huddled together, giving and receiving comfort.

Spike looked over to the sofa and caught Xander's eye. He gestured with his head for Xander to join him and Angel. Xander extricated himself from the pile of girls, who merely rearranged themselves, slipping into the warm void his large body left. He joined the two serious-looking vampires. Spike slid an arm around his waist, and Angel wrapped one of his huge hands around his shoulder. Xander leaned into Spike. Angel cleared his throat and spoke softly. "Spike and I were over here debating which one of us is the bigger asshole." Xander gave him a half-grin and quipped, "That's easy – it's you." They all shared a small smile at the very small joke.

"So, why are you guys assholes this time?" Xander asked. Angel looked directly into Xander's eyes. "I made her. And I made her insane. I don't know why she wanted to do this to you, Xander, but it's my fault – I made her." Angel's voice was anguished, and Xander could tell that he was forcing himself not to drop his gaze from the human's eyes. Xander was distracted by a harsh laugh from Spike. "I could have killed her. I had her right there, I had the stake, and I was ready. But I let her go. I let her go and she hurt you, Xan. I don't think there are words enough to say how much I regret that right now." The distress in his friend's voice sent a bolt of pain through Xander. He looked from one to the other, from blue eyes to brown

and back. He took a deep breath and spoke.

"Now, you two listen to me. I did this exact same thing. I thought if only I hadn't lingered at class, if only I hadn't stopped to take a shower or stand in Lex's room, maybe she could have been saved, and maybe Lex could have been saved. If I had stayed home from class, or if I hadn't been born on the Hellmouth, or if I hadn't made Amy cast that love spell back in high school that made Dru notice me, or if I'd never been born, then maybe Shari could have lived. But I found out that that's not the way it works." He laughed a bitter laugh. "God, I'm from Sunnydale – I should know this stuff by heart. You can't go back and change things – the world doesn't work that way. Angel, it's not your fault for making her or making her crazy, and Spike – Will, it's not your fault for not killing her." He ran a hand through his hair and looked at the vampires grimly. His voice hardened to steel. "This is her fault. She took their lives. I don't know why, and I don't really fucking care. I came back here for a reason. I need your help. And she dies."

Spike and Angel exchanged a look, and then both looked at Xander. They nodded and spoke as one. "She dies." "By your hand" Spike added in a whisper, and Xander nodded back.

The three men turned to the sofa and started sorting out the girls, waking them only enough to get them on their feet. Angel herded Buffy, Dawn and Cordelia onto the elevator, to take them to their respective rooms. Xander swept a drowsy Willow up into his arms and followed, waiting for the car to come back down. He didn't see Spike anywhere, but surmised that the blond vampire had probably gone out for a cigarette. Xander hadn't seen him smoke for the duration of his stay, but figured that the night's events probably warranted a cigarette or thirty. The elevator arrived and Xander stepped in. Willow snuggled her face into his chest and sighed. They reached the fourth floor, and he set her on her feet at her door, supporting her as she dug in her pocket for her room key. She unlocked the door, and he led her into the small suite and sat her on the bed. He knelt to remove her tennis shoes. He saw her suitcase on the floor and left her for a second to pull an oversized sleep shirt out of it.

She had fallen over on her back on the bed. He righted her and pulled the neck of the shirt over her head so she was covered. He unbuttoned her blouse and removed it, then deftly removed her bra, admiring the purple lace garment. He threaded her arms through the sleeves and pulled the long shirt down around her hips. He stood her up and braced her with one hand as he unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans. He sat her back down and stripped them off of her, leaving her socks on. He couldn't help himself and peeked to see if her panties were purple lace, too. He flushed when he realized that they were; they were also thongs. He bundled her under the covers and pressed a kiss to her forehead. He whispered, "I love you, Willow," and went to the door. As he turned off the light, he whispered,

“Nice underwear.” She whispered back, “Thanks.” Smiling, he shut the door and headed back to the elevator, wondering what was going to happen when he reached 501.

In room 501, Spike was pacing like a caged tiger. While Angel and Xander had been dealing with the women, Spike had returned to their suite. When Xander had finally spoken Drusilla’s name, several things had become crystal clear to the vampire. He instantly understood Xander’s hesitation to get even more intimate with him. The idiot thought that he still loved Dru – that he would reject Xander because of some misplaced loyalty to his insane sire. When her name had been spoken, all Spike had felt was pain and regret and anger – no love, no longing. He owed Dru his unlife, but that debt had been settled by over a hundred years of loving care. Her existence was forfeit: payment for the lives of Shari and Lex.

Spike was still unsure of what was going to happen when Xander returned. He wanted more than anything to take the mortal in his arms and make him forget everything for a while. He didn’t know if Xander would be receptive. He wasn’t totally positive that Xander really wanted to be.

On his way back to the suite, Spike had quickly gone up to the penthouse, to Angel and Buffy’s huge suite on the top floor. He let himself in, using the copy of their key that he’d had made for his own use years ago. He walked into their enormous bathroom, and into Buffy’s massive walk-in closet. He found a pile of shopping bags in a corner and chose one. Back in the bathroom, he skirted the Jacuzzi tub and selected several candles

from a towering display of them on the tub surround. He flipped several over to find the cinnamon scent he was looking for and placed those into his bag. Passing through the bedroom, he opened the drawer of Angel's bedside table and sifted through the contents. Smiling, his fingers closed on what he needed, and the item was placed in the bag, also.

From their refrigerator, he liberated a decent bottle of wine, and from their cabinet a pair of glasses. He wrapped these in a dishtowel and placed them in his rapidly filling bag. Their fridge also yielded some fine chocolates and a package of strawberries. Whistling, Spike retreated with his selections.

Back in 501, he had fooled with the lights to find the best combination of the indirect lights and small lamps. He had placed the chocolates and strawberries on a plate on the bar and the wine in a bucket of ice. He'd entered his bedroom and turned down the bedding, throwing about ten hard little designer throw pillows to the floor. He retrieved a fluffy towel from the bathroom, and folded it on the bedside table. He placed the purloined, and thankfully unopened, tube of lubricant under his pillow so it would be warm. He turned the stereo to a station that played melodic instrumental music, turning it down low. He left the room lit only with the light spilling out of the bathroom from the partially closed door and two of the cinnamon scented candles, burning on the dresser, their flames reflected in the mirror.

The bedroom set up to his liking, Spike had moved back to the parlor. He set two more of the candles on the bar and lit them. He removed his boots and socks,

stashing them in the hall closet. He also pulled his sweater off and mussed his hair up a little more. As a final bit of stage dressing, he unbuttoned the top button of his jeans, allowing the faded garment's low waist to settle further down on his hips. Then he waited, and paced.

Spike's pacing had led him to the far side of the room when the door opened. Xander stood in the open door and looked at the vampire. His eyes swept from the pale, bare feet up the jean clad legs, lingering on the triangle of flesh exposed by the open button. Xander's gaze crawled appreciatively up the lean, muscled torso and arms. He moved his eyes up the other man's face inch by slow inch, taking in the pointed chin, the moist pink lips and the occasional flash of Spike's tongue flitting out to moisten them. Xander raised his eyes to admire the sculpted cheekbones, thrown into sharp relief by the muted lighting, before meeting Spike's penetrating blue eyes. Xander tore his gaze from the vampire's face to take in the whole picture - from the tousled blond waves to the thumbs hooked casually in the belt loops of the tight jeans, to the way he shifted his weight almost imperceptibly from one bare foot to the other.

Xander shut the door behind him and stepped into the room. When Spike made a move to walk forward, he held up a hand. In a surprisingly steady voice he said, "No, Will - stay there." Giving the vampire a smile, he sat on the couch and unlaced his tennis shoes, slowly removing them and his socks, and then flexing his toes in the deep carpet. Standing up, he pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it on the sofa. He walked very slowly toward his vampire, and Spike could think of

nothing but a dark panther, stalking its prey. The smile was gone, and in its place was a look of lust, wonder, trust and anticipation that made Spike's knees weak. Xander came to stand in front of him and raised a hand, laying it flat on Spike's cheek. He pressed their foreheads together for a moment, and then increased the distance between them so he could look into beautiful, shining blue eyes. "I want you, Will. Just you. Can I have you?" he asked earnestly. Spike placed his hand on Xander's chest and simply breathed the one word, "yesssss" on a hiss of air. Xander replied, "Good," and kissed him.

The kiss was hot and thorough. Both men knew that they had all the time in the world. They exchanged languid kisses and small touches, standing inches apart. Spike ran both hands into Xander's hair, digging his fingers into the scalp and dragging them back. He scratched lightly at the back of the neck under those dark waves, and drew his finger forward to trace the contours of an ear. His mouth slid against Xander's, and when the other man groaned, he slipped his tongue inside to start a slow exploration. Xander's hands moved on Spike's face, tracing the hollow below his cheekbone, made more prominent by the action of his mouth. One hand tangled into blond waves and pulled slightly.

They broke the kiss, and Xander caught his breath. "Your place or mine?" he asked. Spike replied "Mine," and took Xander's hot hand in his to tug him toward the prepared room. Once inside the door, Xander looked around at the candles and the turned-down covers, and then walked to the side of the bed, gesturing for Spike to join him. The vampire was at his

side in an instant, kissing him and tumbling him onto the large, soft mattress. They rolled, coming to rest with Spike on top of Xander. He looked down into the face below him. "God, Xan, you're so gorgeous. I can't believe you want me. Tell me."

Xander spoke between kisses. "I want you." Kiss. "I want you so much." Kiss. "When I looked at you downstairs," Kiss. "And I saw that you understood," Kiss. "I thought I was going to die with happiness." Kiss. Longer kiss. "Just then, " Kiss. "When I thought that I was going to lose you, too," Kiss. "I realized how much I want you, how much I need you." Kiss. "I know this is weird, but I feel like this is where I'm supposed to be." Kiss. "And I'm supposed to be here with you, like this." Spike dipped his head and gave Xander a searing kiss, leaving him totally breathless. While the human sucked in oxygen, Spike spoke.

"Yes, you are. Here. With me," Spike growled, and coherent speech was quickly over. Mouths came together, lips and tongues clashing, and two sets of hands began to explore two hard chests. Xander rolled them over, taking the top position and exploiting his weight to pin the vampire down. He broke their kiss and moved down to lick and suck at Spike's neck. He kissed the spot over Spike's jugular vein, marveling at the lack of a pulse there. He opened his mouth wide and bit down gently on that sensitive skin. Spike threw his head back and keened "Xanderrrrrrr," while thrusting his hips to meet the ones above them. Xander bit harder, and swept one hand up to find Spike's sensitive nipple with his fingers. He rolled and pinched the peaked flesh, loving the unnecessary pants and growls and half-words coming from the mouth

under him. Replacing his fingers with his mouth, he sucked Spike's pebbled flesh and slipped two fingers into the waistband of the faded blue jeans. His fingers encountered the slick head of Spike's cock, and Xander gasped at the contact. Spike's gasp answered him when he swirled his fingers around the crown and squeezed slightly, feeling the flesh surge and twitch against him.

He moved his hand to the tab of the jeans' zipper, and pulled it down slowly, one tooth at a time. He slid his mouth down the center of the vampire's abdomen, tracing the beautifully defined muscles with his tongue, smiling as they jumped under the hot assault. With both hands, he spread the front of Spike's jeans and smiled because Spike wasn't wearing underwear. Xander pushed his hands under the material to slide it from the narrow hips, and Spike raised his body enough to allow the jeans to be stripped from him. Moving back up the bed, Xander purposely ground his denim-covered erection against Spike's bare one, eliciting a shout that he caught in his open mouth.

Spike could take no more, and he easily reversed their positions, his naked body draped over the larger one below him. He repeated Xander's actions, working his way down the other man's neck and chest, then stripping off his black jeans and sitting back on his heels to toss them on the floor. Xander was spread out before him. His arms were up, both hands rested on the pillow behind his head as he watched the vampire through eyes gone dark with desire. Xander's face was flushed, his lips swollen from their passionate kisses. His small, dark nipples were drawn to tiny points. He was turned slightly to rest on one hip, his legs sprawled

open in a wanton pose. The fine line of hair that arched down his abdomen ended in a dark swirl that framed his jutting cock. Spike noted the size of what was before him and smiled. Who knew the whelp had such lovely hidden assets? Xander was almost painfully erect, and a steady stream of moisture dripped onto his belly.

Xander's eyes were locked on the body before him. Spike was magnificent. His body was compact and muscular, every sinew tensed as he balanced on his knees. His hair was hanging in his face, framing his beautiful, glittering blue eyes. He dropped his hands onto the bed and stalked up the sheets to where Xander lay. He looked like a tiger as he crawled toward the body of his lover, the sinuous, feline shape of his body made Xander twitch in anticipation. Finally, he reached his destination, and the two were finally flesh to flesh, their bodies sealed against one another. They simply held each other for a moment, and then Xander started kissing Spike again.

They kissed and touched as the passion flamed in them again. Xander moaned when Spike licked his way down his body and enclosed his hardness in that cool mouth. Spike worked his way around Xander's cock, tasting the man's essence and sucking at that jutting column of arousal. Xander shouted again when Spike drew back and then took all of Xander into his mouth, burying his nose in the nest of curls at the base of Xander's cock and sucking and swallowing against the head. Xander pulled at the blond curls, knowing that he would not be able to take the intense suction for long. Spike relented and released Xander's flesh with an audible pop. He moved back up and kissed Xander,

letting the boy taste himself inside the cool cavern of the vampire's mouth.

Lying on their sides, they explored each other's bodies, kissing, touching, licking, sucking and nibbling. Xander's hand closed over Spike's erection, and the vampire thrust into his hand. He then moved to press their cocks together, and placed his hand over Xander's to move in tandem over both of them. When Xander intensified the pace and threw his leg over Spike's hip, the vampire reached under the pillow, retrieving the lubricant. Xander raised an eyebrow at him, but made no comment. Spike kissed him, so the human would not see how much his hands were shaking as he lubricated his fingers, and slipped his hand under the cocked leg. His slick fingers danced over Xander's sac, feeling the heavy orbs pulled up against the human's body. He slid one digit over the smooth, taut perineal skin and brushed lightly against the puckered opening.

Xander shifted back into the touch, and Spike's finger rubbed against him, not yet seeking entry. Xander took up a rhythm, thrusting forward into their hands and back against Spike's finger. Finally, gently, the vampire pushed the tip of his finger inside. He hissed at the tightness of the hot, silken flesh around him and waited. Xander didn't alter his thrusts, and the tight ring of muscle eased as he worked himself back onto the finger. Spike held his hand still to allow Xander to adjust to the contact, and then started moving the finger in and out when Xander demanded "More." Spike worked another slick finger into the body of his lover, going slowly to allow his muscles to adjust. Once the two fingers moved easily, Spike scissored them to stretch Xander further. Thrusting them in deeply, he

twisted his hand and crooked his fingers to brush against Xander's prostate, earning him a shout and the clench of convulsing muscles on his fingers. He repeated the motion until Xander was almost sobbing against him. The hand on their cocks had stopped moving, as Xander lay paralyzed by the intensity of his pleasure. Every bit of his awareness was centered on the fingers inside him and the feelings they were invoking. Xander gasped as Spike pulled his fingers out, then groaned deeply as they returned, joined by a third.

This time, Spike avoided the human's sensitive gland, not wanting him to come too soon. He worked the fingers in and out, loving the expression of pleasure and pain and longing on Xander's face as the man thrashed beside him. He took an unneeded breath and stopped moving his fingers, laughing gently when Xander bucked back against his hand. Spike waited for the brown eyes to open, and then waited again while they focused on his. "Xan, luv, I need to know what you want." Xander's voice was low and strained, hoarse with passion. "Will, baby – I want you, just you." Spike shuddered from head to toe at the sound. He kissed the human lightly on the mouth. "Pet, I need to know what we're doing here – um, you know, who's on top, who's on bottom, that sort of thing." Xander met the blue eyes and said, "I think we're doing great the way we are." He hesitated. Spike spoke again. "Xan, with that guy in Phoenix" His voice trailed off. Xander's eyes widened. "Will, Spike, honey, baby, lover – can we not have this conversation right now?" he laughed. Spike growled in frustration. "I'm just askin' if you've ever bottomed before, luv. I don't want to hurt you." Xander laughed again. "Oh! I get it. No, Will, I never

did before – you’re my first.”

Blue eyes lit up and then darkened with lust. Xander’s body was so tight that Spike had suspected his experience was limited, but he’d never imagined that the boy was a virgin. The thought that he would receive such a gift was overwhelming. Coming to a decision, Spike pulled his fingers from Xander’s body, eliciting a frustrated whine. Spike laughed and lightly slapped Xander’s hip. “I’m not stopping, you git. Roll over – it’ll be easier on you. We can save the complicated stuff for later.” Xander grinned and leaned up to give Spike a long, hot kiss before rolling onto his stomach and rising to his knees. Spike gathered two of the pillows and pushed them under the human’s chest, watching the play of muscles as Xander wrapped his arms around them.

Putting more lubricant on his shaking fingers, Spike returned to gently preparing his lover. He truly didn’t want to cause any pain. He desperately wanted to get this right and make this experience good for Xander. By the time Spike had worked his fingers against the boy to his satisfaction, Xander was in an incredible state of arousal, pressing back against the fingers inside him while rubbing his dripping cock against the bed sheets, burying his moans and pleas in the pillows. Finally, he lifted his head from the pillow and arched his back. When Spike leaned forward to kiss the back of his neck, Xander captured the blond head with one hard hand and growled, “Will, if you aren’t inside me like now, I’m going to have to kill you.” Spike simply whispered against his ear, “OK, baby,” and smiled when Xander’s entire body arched even further back against him.

The lips left Xander's ear, and the fingers left his body. For a moment he felt bereft, but after that he couldn't think about anything but the cool, slick head of Spike's cock, pressing against the entrance to his body. Spike thrust lightly against him, shaking with the effort of controlling his motion, and the head breached Xander's body. Xander hissed as his lover slipped past the tight ring of muscle. Spike stopped to allow Xander to adjust to the intrusion, and didn't move until he felt the boy pressing back against him. Inch by inch, Spike pushed himself into the hot, tight channel before him. His iron control was stretched to breaking point. All he wanted to do was slam his cock deep into this body again and again, but his desire to pleasure Xander won out.

Xander couldn't believe the sensations he was feeling. His lover in Phoenix, Danny, had been very submissive – not at all interested in topping, and Xander had been fine with that. Now, he saw what he'd been missing. With Spike fully inside him Xander felt stretched, full and complete. The feeling of holding part of his lover inside his body was incredibly intimate. There was some pain; Spike was big. Xander panted as they lay locked together, and as soon as he was ready, he pressed back against Spike and whispered, "Now, Will. Love me"

As soon as he heard those quiet words, Spike was lost. He curled his fingers around Xander's hips and started to move within him. He slid his cock almost completely out, then pressed it back home with one long stroke, and then repeated the action. After several strokes, he altered his angle so he could be sure to hit the human's prostate on most of his strokes. Xander began to wail

and thrash beneath him, his hips pushing back to meet each thrust. Spike lost himself in the incredible heat and tightness of their coupling. He knew that he could not last, and that Xander was also very close to his own release. Spike worked one hand around Xander's hip and surrounded his hard shaft, stroking in time to his thrusts. Within just a few strokes, he heard Xander groan deeply, and the boy's hot fluid spilled over his hand. The resulting shuddering and clenching of muscle drove Spike over the edge, and he came, shooting his cool seed deep into Xander's body.

Xander pushed the pillows out from under his chest and collapsed facedown on the sheets, carrying Spike with him and not caring that he was lying in quite a mess. Spike remained draped over his lover's back, his cock still inside, as they both panted. Eventually, Xander's breathing returned to normal, and Spike's stopped altogether. Spike's softening cock slipped out of Xander's body. A cool tongue invaded Xander's ear, and a kiss was pressed to his temple. "Come on, luv – let's go see if those fancy bathtubs are really big enough for two, eh?"

Part Sixteen

Xander stepped on the elevator, happy to see Buffy already in the car. They hugged, and he pressed a kiss to her cheek. She smiled at him. "You're up pretty early. How are you feeling?" There was concern in her voice. She was startled by his blinding smile. "I feel good." She looked at him closely. "You look like a new man – you must have slept great." He simply replied, "I did," not sure how much he wanted to share with Buffy about his relationship with Spike. The elevator stopped, and Willow was waiting outside the door. As

soon as she stepped onto the elevator, she hugged both of her friends. They exchanged greetings as they arrived at the lobby. Following the smell of coffee to the hotel's kitchen, they found Cordelia and Dawn chatting at the table while the three children played at a smaller table.

The new arrivals greeted the kids, and then got themselves coffee and joined the two women. Xander looked around the table at the four beautiful women and felt right at home. He told them so, and they all smiled at him. "Who wants breakfast?" Xander asked. Even though it was nearly noon, and Dawn and Cordelia had breakfasted much earlier with the children, everyone agreed to at least have toast. Xander went to the huge refrigerator and started pulling out ingredients for omelets. The lively conversation kept up while Xander cracked eggs and chopped vegetables and threw bread in the toaster. They decided that shopping was the order of the day. Dawn revealed that Jase had offered to take all three kids to the park so Xander and his women could spend some time together in the afternoon.

Xander was getting ready to pour the eggs into the omelet pans when he heard Willow say "Awwww," and giggle behind him. He looked over his shoulder and felt his heart repeat Willow's sentiment. Spike had padded into the kitchen on bare feet, wearing black drawstring sleep pants and his gray sweater from the night before. His hair was sticking up all over his head, and he was rubbing his eyes with his fist like a child. He was absolutely adorable. He walked past the kids' table and dropped a kiss on top of Sara's head, and ruffled the twins' hair. He wandered to the refrigerator and pulled

out a bag of blood, tossing it into the microwave to heat. He leaned against the wall and rubbed his hands over his face. When he looked up, the four women and his beautiful, dark-haired lover were all looking at him with soft expressions. He tried to scowl, but the look dissolved into a shy smile. "Morning, ladies, Xan."

Xander replied, "Hey, Will. Hungry?" Spike nodded, "Starving. Then I'm going back to bed. These human hours will kill you." The microwave dinged, and he retrieved his blood and poured it into a mug. He slapped Xander lightly on the ass and strolled over to the table, hooking a chair with one foot and turning it around to straddle it, resting one arm on the chair back. By the time Xander started carrying plates to the table, Spike and the women were discussing the upcoming shopping trip in an animated fashion. Xander turned his attention to his plate and steadily worked his way through an enormous omelet and four pieces of toast. By the time he raised his head from his plate, the conversation had stopped and everyone was looking at him. "What?" he asked, defensively.

"I guess some things never do change," Willow observed dryly. Xander's only reply was to pilfer her last half-piece of toast from her plate and eat it in one bite. They agreed to meet at the car in a half-hour for the shopping trip, and Dawn and Cordelia offered to see to the dishes and turn the kids over to Jase. Xander, Spike, Willow and Buffy all headed for the elevator.

As the elevator door closed and left the fifth floor, Xander spun Spike around and pinned him to the corridor wall. Blue eyes widened for a second, and then

crinkled with Spike's smile. Xander leaned in, but stopped with his lips a fraction of an inch from Spike's. "Will?" he said, "Do you have any idea how fucking hot you looked when you came into the kitchen this morning?" His voice was a low, sensual growl, and he looked deeply into Spike's eyes. "Do you have any idea how badly I wanted to just grab you and throw you over the kitchen table, right there in front of everybody and show you how hot I think you are?" For emphasis, Xander pressed his erection against the front of Spike's sleep pants, which now sported a sizeable one of their own. Xander repeated the action again and again, but still didn't close the distance between their lips. He waited. He watched the blue eyes of his lover cloud over and lose focus as the lengths of their erections rubbed together. Spike's pointed tongue came out to moisten his lips, and he whispered, "What was the question, again?" Xander replied, "Fuck if I know," and finally kissed the vampire.

Spike tore his lips away from Xander's and pushed him back. Xander fought to stay close, and Spike whispered, "Room, luv. Get back in the room. Now. Please." They scrambled to the door, and Xander fumbled with his key. As soon as they were inside the door, they were kissing and pulling off clothing and stumbling toward Spike's bedroom. Xander pushed Spike to the edge of the bed and then onto it, pulling the black sleep pants from his body as he fell. He stripped off his own jeans and lay down, positioning them so that they were head-to-feet. Spike caught on right away, and in one smooth motion captured his lover's cock in his mouth and swallowed it all the way down to the root. Xander's mouth opened with a strangled yelp, and Spike's hardness was right there.

He licked firmly around the dripping head, and then took as much of the straining flesh as he could into his mouth.

Spike rolled them over so that he was positioned beneath Xander, giving the human more control, and hoping that gravity would assist him in fighting the urge to thrust deeply into his lover's mouth. This position also allowed Xander to thrust as deeply as he wanted to, and Spike was suddenly very happy that he didn't have to breathe as Xander did just that, fucking his mouth in long, hard strokes.

Xander felt something against his hand, and fumbled for it. He'd found the tube of lubricant from the night before. Not releasing his tight suction on Spike's cock, he opened the tube and slicked his fingers. Seconds later he was brushing those fingers against the tight opening to Spike's body. Groaning, the vampire spread his legs, allowing Xander full access. The groan intensified when Xander worked a finger inside and began to pump it in and out of the snug channel. He added a second, and then a third, marveling at the clench and play of slick internal muscles, and the hot sounds that were coming out of the mouth he was fucking. He felt himself tensing and knew that his orgasm was near. Wanting them to come together, he intensified the suction on the hard flesh in his mouth and worked his fingers faster. As he felt his balls draw up tightly, signaling his impending release, Xander crooked his fingers and pressed hard against Spike's prostate. Each man bucked into the other's mouth as they came.

Ten minutes later, hands washed and teeth brushed,

Xander boarded the elevator, remembering the soft kiss he had received as he'd tucked the sleepy vampire into his bed, soothing him off to sleep with the promise of presents.

Part Seventeen

The shopgirl gave Xander a brilliant smile and handed him an ice-cold can of Coke. He smiled gratefully and drained half of it in one gulp. She was blonde and had blue eyes, and a gorgeous figure that was showcased by her short, red sundress and matching sandals. She leaned against the marble-topped counter and folded her arms under the perfectly shaped, braless breasts that seemed to be standard equipment on LA shopgirls. "You're a good husband," she observed. "Taking your wife and her friends out shopping. Most men would have run screaming by now." Xander looked at her thoughtfully for a moment. "What makes you think one of them is my wife?" he asked. She pointed at his left hand. "Ring." He smiled sheepishly. "Oh, yeah." He paused, and then asked with a grin, "Which one do you think is my wife?" The girl considered for a moment and said, "Either the blonde or the redhead. I can tell that you love all of them, but you definitely treat both of the brunettes like they're your sisters. Come to think of it, you treat all of them like your sisters. So, my guess is that your wife's not here." Tilting his head, he said, "You're very good at this."

Just then, Dawn and Cordelia burst from separate

dressing rooms, wearing the exact same dress. They took one look at each other and both turned back to the dressing rooms with a snort of annoyance. Xander dropped his head into his hands and sighed. He looked back at the shopgirl. "Do you have a men's department? I need to get a gift for a friend." She led him to the other side of the store. Xander started looking through a display of knit v-necked pullover shirts, looking for something that would make Spike look even more fuckable. He was holding two of them side by side when Cordelia walked up. Xander glanced over at her. "That's a great outfit – I think you should get it." She sighed with annoyance, "Xander, this is the outfit I wore in here." "Oh," he replied. She took the sweaters out of his hands and held them up to him. "These aren't your size." "Well, no," he replied. "They're not, um, for me."

A light went on in her eyes, and she said, "Ooooooh. Well, in that case, the orange is a definite 'no'. He just looks scary in orange – like a demented pumpkin. This purple is pretty weird, too. Try these." She picked up a deep blue sweater and a dark burgundy one. "The burgundy is way too Angel, but I like the blue," he replied, dropping the offending garment. Dawn joined them with a pile of clothes draped over her arm. She eyed the blue shirt. "For Spike?" Xander nodded, and she said, "Yeah – that's gonna look even better than the one he had on last night. Grrrr." She and Cordelia laughed together at Xander's expression. "What?" Cordelia demanded. "He's incredibly hot, Xander. Don't even try to tell me you don't think so." Xander opened his mouth to reply and then shut it with a snap, feeling a blush stain his face. Buffy and Willow joined the group, and Buffy reached out to touch the sweater.

“For Spike?” The other girls nodded, and she made a gesture as if wiping sweat off her brow. Willow simply let out a low whistle.

Grabbing one other garment from the display, Xander handed it and the blue shirt to the shopgirl. “I’ll take it,” he said. “Can you gift wrap those for me?” The girl nodded and gave Xander a little smile that told him she was pretty sure she’d figured out a few things about his “wife”. He couldn’t help but think to himself “if only she knew”. He dutifully followed her to the cash stand, his women following in his wake.

The next stop was a shoe store, and Xander was thrilled to see that there was a music store next door. He begged off of going to Shoe Hell and entered the store, happy to have a little respite from the chatter of the girls. The few days he’d spent at Spike’s had been blissfully quiet. He and Spike had talked, but had also spent a fair amount of time in comfortable silence. The girls all had so much to say to him and each other that his head was ringing. He loved it, but he needed a break. He stepped up to a computer terminal located just inside the store and typed in a few searches. A page printed out with a list of his selections and their locations in the large store. He grabbed the paper and began shopping.

After securing his purchases, Xander walked back down to the shoe store. Willow was standing outside, leaning against a brick wall, shopping bags at her feet. “Good thing we brought Dawn’s Suburban Assault Vehicle,” he quipped, taking in the number of bags. She laughed, “That’s not the half of it. We may have to call for back up. Big sale.” She gestured at the shoe store. Xander

pouted. "I'm never getting lunch, am I?" He leaned against the wall at her side.

"So, Wills, what's your story? Are you happy up in Canada?" Xander's look was thoughtful. Willow turned and gave him a brilliant smile. "I am. I really am. I love my work, and I can do a little magic without freaking out and going all dark side. I think being so far from the Hellmouth takes away the temptation, and there aren't so many dark forces swirling around in the Great White North. The dark forces aren't big on the cold weather sports, I guess." Xander screwed up his face. "Um, what exactly are the cold weather sports?" She laughed and said, "The usual. Skiin'. Snowshoein'. Snugglin'." They shared a smile. "Do you have somebody special, Wills?" She paused, and then looked a little sad. "I have a few people I see. Oz comes up now and again, when he's on tour and stuff. We've had some good times. And there've been others." She took a deep breath. "I'm happy, Xander." He reached out and took her hand, knowing that she was leaving many things unsaid, many things about Tara and what she had lost when the beautiful, shy witch had died.

"Oh, hey!" Willow exclaimed. "I forgot! Oz is probably here in town. He does session work here a lot." Her smile dimmed. "Crap! I didn't bring my book with all of his numbers." Xander pulled a small cell phone out of his pocket. "Have no fear, my dear – technology to the rescue." He dialed a few numbers and waited. "Los Angeles. Daniel Osborne," he said into the instrument. He pushed another button, and then turned the phone so Willow could see the display. "Is that his number?" he asked. When she nodded, he punched another button and then closed the phone. He handed it to her.

"The number's in the memory. You can call him later if you want to. It would be nice to see Oz. He's so wonderfully quiet," he mused. Willow laughed. "Why do you think I had to come out here? My head was exploding."

After a few moments of silence, Xander turned to Willow. "I need to ask you something," he began. "What ... what was it like for Spike after I left?" Her green eyes met his, and he could see deep sadness there. "Let's sit down," she suggested. "This could take a while." They sank down with their backs against the wall, both crossing their legs under them. Once they were settled, she began to speak. "OK, you were here for the 'crazy in the basement' phase and the 'oh, the crushing guilt' phase. And then you left." Xander winced, but there was no heat in her words. "We all really thought you were pulling another Oxnard; that you'd be back in a while. There was a lot of upheaval for everybody. Buffy had to take care of Dawn and the potentials and the families of the potentials who'd died." She paused, and Xander remembered that one of those who had died had been Kennedy, with whom Willow had had a relationship. He clasped her hand in sympathy.

"Angel and his people were busy here, so Spike and I were kind of the only two left. We were both in bad shape. He struggled, Xander, he really struggled with the different parts of himself." She twined her fingers in her lap, her voice dropping. "Some days he was all demon, and he scared the shit out of me. Some days he was all soul, and he'd sit there and tell me stories about all the awful things he had done in that beautiful, cultured William voice and he'd just cry like a baby."

She looked up at Xander, and he could see the pain in her eyes. "God, he tried to kill me several times, but he never could. At the time, I think I would have welcomed it."

Her voice became dreamy. "One time, I tried to provoke him into killing me. I said the worst things to him. I called him an animal and a killer and a freak and a beast and a murderer. I screamed and ranted and raved and taunted him for being too big a coward to come after me and just end it all. He vamped out, and he had his hands on my shoulders hard enough to leave bruises, bruises where you could see the mark of each individual finger. He had me, and my head was to the side, and he was so close." Her voice dropped again, and Xander could see the tears in her eyes. "He was right there, Xander, and he stopped." A single tear rolled down her face unheeded. "He stopped, and he kissed me on the neck, just a feather-light kiss, and then he took me in his arms and held me while I cried, because he knew that every word I had said to him was about me, and the things I had done; the things I had been." More tears flowed down her face, and her eyes came up to meet Xander's. "Spike saved me. I thought I was helping him, but he saved me. He made me see that we were the same. He said that by helping me, he proved to himself that there was something in him worth saving. So, I guess we saved each other."

Xander clasped her hand tighter and leaned forward to press a kiss to her forehead. He brought his hands to her face and used his thumbs to smooth her tears away. "I'm glad," he said. "When I got to his house, he was strange. He didn't recognize me at first, and then he was so ... reserved. He didn't give me a hard time,

or anything. He's so different now." She smiled at him and wiped her eyes. "He never hated you for leaving. I think he thought that he deserved for everyone to leave him. You two seemed to be sort of friends when you went, but I think he was too conflicted to notice much." She smiled wryly. "He was still obsessed with Buffy back then. You're right – he's very different. The old Spike was all bravado and smartass; he's relaxed that a lot. By the time I left, he was doing OK. Did he tell you about making Angel give him money?" Xander nodded, but gestured for her to tell him more.

"Oh, God, Xander – it was hysterical. Spike was living with me at the time, and I had just accepted the teaching position in Canada. He came down here and met with Angel, and when he came back he was positively giddy." A real smile split her face, and Xander was unable to do anything other than smile back. "I forced him to tell me the story. Apparently, he totally guilted Angel out of a bunch of money they'd gotten in Europe in the Bloody Old Days. He really played him. That's when I knew he was going to be OK, because he was so proud of himself for working Angel." They laughed together, and then Xander's face clouded.

"Wills, I know I owe you a huge apology. I barely said goodbye, and then I never came back or stayed in touch or anything." He sighed and looked down at his hands clasped in his lap. "When things were bad, I was ashamed to come back or call you guys – I didn't want you to know what a fuckup I still was. Then, things got good, and I was too scared." He looked into her eyes, and saw understanding there. "I get that," she said. "You were afraid that if you came back here, no matter

how happy and wonderful and successful you were, you'd still be the Zeppo." He nodded. "When did you get so insightful?" he asked. She laughed, "Not me, that was Spike's theory. I ranted to him one time about you leaving, and he told me I was being selfish. He said that I should be happy that you'd survived Sunnydale and gotten out, and that I should hope that you were happy. He was right, and I did, Xander. I hoped with all my heart that you were happy; that you'd found someone to love who loved you." She touched the platinum bands on his finger. "And you did, so I can't feel bad about you leaving; because you found Shari, and she loved you for you - the way you deserve to be loved." It was Xander's turn to wipe his eyes. Willow paused, and then waited until his brown eyes met her green ones again. "I may be out of line here," she said, "but you're my best friend, so I don't care." She gave him the resolve face that he remembered. "Spike cares about you. I can see it every time he looks at you. Don't hurt him, OK?" Xander swallowed hard and whispered, "OK."

The door to the shoe store opened, and Xander heard familiar voices chattering. He stood and pulled Willow to her feet, hugging her briefly. They gathered their bags and joined the other girls to trek back to the car with their loot.

Xander stumbled into the hotel lobby under the burden of at least fifteen shopping bags. He dropped them onto the floor and fell facedown on one of the sofas and groaned. A few seconds later, he felt a hand in his hair and looked up to see Sara standing before him. He smiled at her and said, "Hey, Sweetheart." She held

out her arms, and he pulled her onto the couch, turning on his back and settling her against his chest. She laid her head on his shoulder and made happy noises. Xander marveled at the trust the little girl showed while he patted her small back rhythmically. Xander turned his head and noticed Spike, Jase, Jack and Lily sitting on the floor staring intently at the television. Spike had the little girl on his lap, his chin resting on her dark curls. Spike turned his head and caught Xander staring, and the two men shared a soft smile.

When Xander awoke, he noticed that someone had draped a blanket over them, and that Sara was still deeply asleep on his chest. He also noticed that Spike and Lily were asleep on the other couch, also covered with a blanket. The little girl was curled up in front of the vampire, and his face was half-hidden in her hair. The bags from the shopping trip were piled at the foot of Xander's couch, and he was happy to see that they appeared undisturbed. As he carefully shifted himself into a sitting position against the arm of the sofa, Dawn walked out of the kitchen. She deftly took Sara out of his arms and settled her daughter on her shoulder without waking her. Xander pulled his feet up and she settled beside him.

"Best sleep you'll ever have," she remarked, "with a baby on your chest." She smiled down at her child and then up at Xander. "Yeah, I slept great. How long was I out?" he asked. The perpetual dimness of the heavily curtained lobby kept him from gauging the time accurately. "About an hour," she answered. "There's a plan afoot to go out dancing tonight. Cordy's even offered to keep Sara so Jase and I can have a date."

Her eyes sparkled. "Oh, and Oz is coming over. I can't wait to see him; it's been a while." Xander considered the idea of dancing. Then he considered the idea of dancing with Spike. "Dancing sounds great. Seeing Oz sounds great. And I'm abusing my privilege of using the word 'great', aren't I?" Xander was proud of himself for cutting off the babble before it got started. Dawn grinned. "Yes, you are hereby restricted from using that word in conversation for at least an hour."

Xander glanced over to the other couch and saw that both Lily and Spike were awake, blue and brown eyes watching them gravely, as Spike's pale hand stroked the little girl's dark hair. "Hey, luv, Bit." He drawled in a sleep-roughened voice. "How was shopping?" Xander and Dawn exchanged a look and he said, "It was g ... good." Dawn laughed and chimed in, "He means it was great." Dawn and Xander shared a laugh. Lily started squirming, and Dawn stood and took her hand to guide her back to her mother. As she turned to go, she said, "It's a little after five now – dinner is at seven in the restaurant upstairs, then dancing to follow until the wee hours. Dinner is casual, but I want you guys really hotted up for the dancing. Don't disappoint me." She gave them a severe look and walked away swishing her hips, the effect slightly ruined by the baby on her hip and the sleepy little girl trailing behind her.

Xander turned back to Spike, and lifted the blanket over his legs, gesturing for the vampire to join him. Spike complied, fitting his body in front of the longer one and sighing when Xander's chin hooked over his shoulder and an arm slipped around his waist. He could feel Xander's warm breath tickle his ear as the human whispered, "How do you feel about going dancing?" The

blond head tilted back to rest on his shoulder, and cool lips traced along his cheekbone. Xander shuddered slightly at the delicious sensation. "I'm OK with it, pet. Except ..." Spike hesitated. Xander waited. "If you have any desire to keep our ... this ... us a secret from everybody, going dancing with me is a bad idea. If I dance with you, everybody in the place is going to know how things are." Spike purposely brushed his lips over Xander's sharp cheekbone again and was gratified to feel the shudder that ran through the body behind him. He also felt something else stirring against him, and pressed his hips back against Xander's.

Xander groaned quietly into the soft, white waves and pressed a kiss to Spike's temple. "Will, baby - I don't care what anybody thinks. Besides, I'm pretty sure they've all figured it out. Our friends are not stupid." Spike turned his head and sniffed the air. "True, and it's a good thing you aren't feeling secretive, pet. Willow and Buffy are spying on us from the kitchen doorway right now." He lifted his head from his lover's shoulder and spoke louder. "Come on out, you silly bints, I know you're there." Xander heard giggles, and Buffy and Willow walked out of the shadows, arms linked and faces pink. "Stupid vampire nose," Buffy muttered. The girls sat down on the couch Spike had vacated earlier. Buffy's expression brightened. "Spike, what's a bint?" He glanced at her and started answering automatically, "It's the same thing as a cu ...nevermind." Willow, who already knew what a bint was, broke in. "Xander, did you give Spike his present?"

Spike jumped on that opportunity, sitting up and throwing off the blanket as he turned to Xander. "Yeah,

mate – I was promised presents!” Xander laughed and got up to dig in the shopping bags. He handed a stack of CDs to Spike. “Here – the shop had some good British imports. See if you like any of those.” Spike started flipping through the CDs, exclaiming over several of the titles. Xander had picked him up a selection of 1970’s punk discs that he hoped the vampire didn’t already own. From the way Spike was nodding as he read the titles, Xander surmised he’d done well. His suspicion was confirmed when Spike looked up and gave Xander the most brilliant smile he’d ever seen on the other man’s face. He was momentarily stunned by the joy reflected there. Must remember to do more nice things for the vampire, he told himself.

Willow shoved a gift-wrapped package onto Spike’s lap, and he looked down. Buffy clapped her hands when she saw which package it was. “Yay! We all helped pick this one out. Hurry, open it,” she urged. Just to spite her, the vampire started opening the paper very slowly and carefully at the corner. His patience lasted less than five seconds, and he gleefully shredded the paper. Opening the box, he looked down at the dark blue pullover. He ran his hand over the soft material. “This is nice,” he said. Xander chuckled, “we all think it will really bring out your eyes.” The girls readily agreed. All three were silenced when Spike stripped off his black tee shirt and raised the blue shirt over his head to pull it on. Three sets of eyes were glued to Spike’s bare chest, then all three scrambled for something else to look at as they noticed the others looking.

Settling the blue shirt over his shoulders, Spike looked at the girls. “Do you horny bitches mind?” he asked.

They both gave him a questioning look, and the vampire merely tapped his nose in reply. He laughed when both girls flushed. He turned back to Xander and saw desire in dark eyes as his lover looked at him in the shirt he'd picked out. "I was right," Xander whispered. "It's perfect." Even in the dim light, he could see that the dark hue of the shirt caused Spike's eyes to look even paler and more striking, and the knit material hugged every dip and curve of his muscular chest and abdomen. Xander's hand rose unbidden to rest on the soft material at the center of his vampire's chest. He stroked the material once, and then again. "How long did you say there was before dinner?" Spike asked breathlessly. "There's time," Xander assured him. The two men got up, gathered the shopping bags and moved quickly toward the elevator, leaving the gift wrap, two blankets and two red-faced, startled girls on the sofa.

Buffy and Willow turned toward one another and both breathed, "Wow."

They purposely stood apart in the elevator, not daring to touch. They walked down the hall, Spike slightly in front of Xander. When the blond stopped to unlock the door, the brunet stopped directly behind him and pressed his erection firmly against the vampire's ass, his hands resting on either side of the doorframe. Spike pressed back and then flung the door open. They stumbled into the room, and fell onto the sofa in the parlor. Xander landed on the bottom and pulled Spike across his lap, settling the vampire's knees on either side of his hips. He ran his hands under the new shirt and bunched it up under his lover's arms. Spike raised his arms and slipped out of the garment, gasping as

hot lips and tongue swept across his chest to lick and bite his hardened nipples. He fisted his hands in Xander's sable hair and pulled until the brown eyes looked up at him. He brought their lips together in a rough kiss, thrusting his tongue into the mouth below him in a punishing rhythm. When he could tell that Xander was struggling to breathe, he broke the clinch. While the human gasped against his neck, Spike bent his head to speak into a flushed ear, his voice a low, sensual growl.

"Xan, you make me so hot. I just look at you across the room and I'm rock hard. I get one smell of you, and I'm ready to burst. How do you do this to me? How do you make me want you so much?" Xander leaned his head into the hard, cool lips that were teasing his ear, and Spike obliged him by tracing the delicate shell with his tongue, then licking down the tanned column of Xander's throat. Xander groaned as blunt teeth closed on the spot where his neck and shoulder met. "God, Will," he moaned, "I swear, I think you could make me come just from your voice; the things you say." He gasped as the vampire set up a rhythm, alternating thrusts of his hips and sucking and biting Xander's neck. The human groaned again as the lips left his neck. Blue eyes, almost black with lust, stared into his and twinkled as an evil grin split Spike's face.

"You know what, pet?" Spike asked in a thoughtful tone. "I don't think I'm going to fuck you now. I think that maybe I can wait until after dinner, after dancing. How hot will you be then, I wonder?" Cool fingers traced the contours of Xander's hot face. "After sitting at the table with all of our friends and making small talk while my hand is in your lap? After I spend an hour

or so tracing my fingertips over your cock, reaching down to brush against your balls, running my hand across your ass every time you shift in your seat?" Xander's mouth was open and he was panting harshly as he listened to his lover's voice, hearing the accent change from the London guttersnipe to the Victorian gentleman; the hard words combining with the delicate diction to make his head spin. Spike continued to speak in honeyed, cultured tones.

"After dinner, we're going dancing, right, my love? Probably to one of those places with the smoky lights and the music so loud you can't hear yourself think, with the driving beat that echoes the beat of your heart." Spike's hand came down to brush over the center of Xander's chest, feeling the thud of his heart. "You can sit back and watch me on the dance floor, watch the way I move for you, just for you in a sea of bodies. You can sit back and watch me, drinking a cold beer, feeling the liquid in your mouth, colder than my tongue." He swept that cool tongue against Xander's lips, and then hissed as he felt fingers fumbling at the button and zipper of his jeans. Blue eyes closed for a moment as a hot hand gripped his erection, sliding it free of his jeans and starting a rhythmic stroke.

Spike's eyes opened and met Xander's again. He thrust hard into the other man's hand, but his voice never wavered. "Are you going to dance with me, Xan? As soon as a sexy, slow song comes on, will you get up and stalk over to me, the way you did last night, like a panther on the prowl? I can see you; walking up behind me and pulling me against your chest, so I can feel how hard you are, so I can feel your cock pressed against me and know that you've been hard for hours

already, and know that I'm going to keep you that way for hours longer." Xander couldn't tear his eyes away from Spike's face, from the sight of sparkling eyes and moist, pink lips. "Do you think I can make you beg, luv? Do you think I can make you beg me to take you into the men's room, or some dark corner, or out into the alley and push you up against a wall and shove my way inside you?" Xander hissed, "yes" breathlessly in reply, and raised his hips, searching for friction on his aching cock, while he kept up the bruising pace of his hand on Spike's hardness.

"Yeah," Spike whispered, "You will beg me; you'll beg me to take you, to fuck you up against a wall. But, you know what, Xan? I'm going to tell you no. I'm going to make you wait and wait. I want you so hard and desperate for me that all I'll have to do is touch you once and you'll come." Xander felt Spike's cool hand snake down between his legs, barely staying in contact with the bulge pressing against his black jeans. Spike's lips came to rest at the outer edge of Xander's ear, and his hand rose and gripped the human's cock hard as he growled, "Come for me, NOW!" The combination of Spike's sudden, hard touch and that beautiful voice pushed Xander over the edge. He clasped his free hand on Spike's hip and bucked up into him, gripping the hard cock in his other hand with a punishing stroke as he came with a roar. The vampire followed him into oblivion, shooting spurt after spurt of cold semen over Xander's hand and shirt.

Xander leaned his forehead against his lover's bare chest, and Spike dropped his head to his human's shoulder. They both panted and gasped with the strength of their mutual release. Once his breathing

returned to normal, Xander looked up into Spike's beautiful blue eyes with amazement. "You're incredible, baby," he breathed. Spike answered him with a soft kiss, marveling at the responsiveness of the man beneath him. He really couldn't wait for the rest of the night, since he truly intended to do every single thing he'd described to Xander. He felt his cock twitch and start to harden again at the thought, and climbed reluctantly to his feet. He held a hand out to his sticky, disheveled lover and pulled him off of the couch and toward the bathroom for a shower, stopping only to close the open door of their suite as they passed it.

Angel looked up as Buffy stepped into his office and closed the door behind her. He heard the small sound as the lock engaged. He took in her flushed face, and the way one hand was twining around her neck, rubbing over the claim mark he had placed there so long ago. He sniffed the air and a slow, sensual smile spread across his face as he smelled her arousal. He pushed his chair back from the beautifully carved antique desk and leaned back, spreading his legs. His eyes never left the shining green ones of his mate as she walked forward to stand between his knees. She looked down into his face, and then threw her head back, exposing her long throat and the silvery scar. Angel closed his hands on her upper arms and jerked her downward, his blunt teeth closing on his mark. She screamed.

Hot water pounded down on titian hair and flowed across pale skin. Willow leaned one arm against the marble wall of the shower and pressed her fingers

harder into herself, thrusting and twisting. She swept her thumb across her clitoris and felt her internal muscles clench around her fingers as her orgasm shot through her. The picture in her mind wavered from that of a red-haired man to a blonde girl and back again as she sobbed in release.

Part Eighteen

Xander burst out laughing as he and Spike stopped in front of the plate glass window at the front of the Chanticleer's restaurant. "Mon Petite Choux?" Xander spluttered. "My Little Cabbage? Please tell me that Angel did not name his restaurant 'My Little Cabbage'." Spike rolled his eyes. "Actually, mate, I wouldn't put it past him, but the name came with the joint." Spike swept the door open and bowed at the waist, ushering Xander inside with a grand gesture.

The restaurant was located on the penthouse floor and had an expansive view of the Los Angeles skyline. The room had vaulted ceilings hung with crystal chandeliers, and it was decorated in sumptuous shades of burgundy, navy and antique gold. In front of the windows, a long table was set with white tablecloths, gleaming china and glistening crystal. The fresh flower centerpieces glowed with candlelight. Willow and Oz were seated at one end of the table. Xander hurried to shake hands with the red-haired man. "Oz, hey," he said, when they clasped hands. "It's good to see you." Oz clasped both of his hands around Xander's and

squeezed. "Hey, man." Xander recognized that this, in Oz terms, represented an enormous show of support and sympathy. Oz released Xander's hand to greet Spike with a laconic, "Spike." The response was an equally measured, "Dogboy."

Xander settled into a seat next to Oz, and Spike crossed to a service cart sitting by the window. He removed a beer from a brass tub of ice and poured it into a tall pilsner glass, leaving a perfect inch of foamy head on the top of the amber liquid. Reaching under the cart, he found a bottle of red liquid that had been placed in a thermal wrap to keep it at the perfect temperature. He poured the blood into a crystal goblet, admiring the way the flames of the candles were reflected in the facets of the vessel before he carried the two glasses to the table and set the beer in front of Xander. Brown eyes rose to his. With a soft smile Xander said, "Thanks, Will." Spike slid into the chair next to Xander and sipped his drink, starting slightly when a warm hand stole into his lap under the crisp, white tablecloth. He smiled into his glass when he realized what Xander was doing. The whelp's stealing my plan, he thought, gleefully; full of surprises, he is. Wonder how far he'll take it. Spike shifted in his seat and spread his legs to give the hand better access and suppressed a shudder as fingers ghosted across the fly of his jeans.

The others joined them at the table, Dawn and Cordelia settling their children and then taking their places with Angel, Buffy and Jase. Spike was distracted by Xander's hidden ministrations, but not so much that he didn't notice the relaxed, satisfied expressions on the faces of Willow, Buffy and Angel. He grinned into his

glass again at the thought that his grandsire owed him for what was undoubtedly a hot encounter with the Slayer, if memory served.

Dinner was a lively affair. The restaurant wasn't in regular use – Angel had had the dinner catered. Two uniformed stewards served and then departed discreetly. Spike marveled at Xander's composure as the brunet deftly ate with his left hand while keeping his right occupied in the vampire's lap, running his fingers up and down hardened flesh, curving them down and around, then resting them on Spike's cool thigh, the heat of his hand searing his lover's flesh. When Spike stood to refill their glasses, Xander ran the back of one hand down the lower curve of his ass. By the end of the first course the vampire hovered in a state of exquisite arousal. He had carefully avoided returning any of Xander's caresses, waiting to see how far this wonderful game would go.

Xander's fingers kept up their gentle torment as he told his friends about the martial arts students who would be coming over the next afternoon. He had cleared his plan with Angel earlier and had finalized the details with his teacher over the phone that afternoon. Angel, Buffy and Spike were all planning to participate, and several of the others wanted to watch. Xander fielded questions about his training in a low, calm voice, and Spike was amazed at the human's control, since he himself could barely manage to speak because of the sensations Xander's hot hand was causing.

Dawn and Jase excused themselves from the table after dessert to take a sleepy Sara to bed, offering to also settle Jack and Lily. Cordelia left her seat and

stood behind Spike to lean down between the vampire and her ex-boyfriend. She pretended not to notice the location of Xander's hand. "It's your lucky night, boys," she assured them. "Dawn says I have to make sure you two are the hottest things in that club tonight. So, on that note, Xander has to come with me. Spike, you may come back to your suite in 45 minutes, no sooner." She tugged Xander's elbow, and he rose to his feet, grinning. He leaned down and buried his nose in the soft white waves just above the vampire's ear. "See you soon, baby," he whispered. Spike gave him a slow, hot smile in return.

Cordelia practically dragged Xander away from the table and down the hall. Outside the elevator, she picked up a large satchel from a hall table. At Xander's questioning look she said, "Bag of tricks – it's some stuff I keep around for auditions. You never know what you might need." They traveled down to the fifth floor, continuing the light conversation from dinner. Xander unlocked the suite door and led Cordelia to his bedroom. She stopped at the closet and flung the door open. Staring at the contents, she was silent. Finally, she turned to him with a brilliant smile. "Black it is!" she exclaimed.

Forty minutes later, Xander stared into the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door and smiled a tiny, evil smile. Cordelia was a genius. She'd had him shave, so his face was perfectly smooth, and then she had gone to work. On his feet were short, black leather motorcycle boots that disappeared under the boot-cut legs of a pair of butter-soft black leather jeans. The low waist of the pants was cinched by a wide leather belt that was pierced at intervals with silver grommets, and

closed with a chunky silver buckle. Above the belt, his stomach, chest and arms were outlined against a tight black silk tee shirt. A thick silver chain encircled his wrist, and a dark, thick, tribal-style (temporary) tattoo encircled one bulging bicep. Cordelia had coated her fingers with styling cream and swept them through his sable waves, pushing his hair back from his temples. She had then mussed up the top so random waves curved forward to emphasize dark eyes. To further bring out Xander's eyes, she'd smudged a little black kohl eyeliner around them, and then smoothed a tiny bit of a shimmering gel along the top curve of his cheekbones.

She stood back and admired her work. "You look great!" she enthused, and they exchanged a smile in the mirror. She splashed a minuscule amount of Xander's cologne on her fingers and dragged them lightly behind his ears and down his neck, then followed her fingers with a swipe of a hand towel. "A little goes a long way with the vampire crowd," she told him.

When he raised his eyebrow at her, she raised one of her own. "Well, Xander, you do know that there were a few years before Angel and Buffy got back together, right? Let's just say I had some experience with vampire dating." Xander mulled that over for a few seconds and decided not to give her a hard time; not when she could be a valuable reference. "OK, fearless vampire layer – tell me some undead dating secrets." She wrinkled her nose at him. "You probably already know about biting – any biting. Major turn-on." He nodded sagely, and closed his eyes at the memory of the kiss in Spike's kitchen, against the refrigerator.

"Well," she began "Turnaround time is almost zero, they're extra-flexible, omni-sexual, if they have inhibitions of any kind then I don't know what they are Hmmmm ...oh, yeah – dominance!" Cordelia's eyes lit up. "If you can get it turned around where you're the dominant one, that's huge. Some vampires are more dominant than others – like Angel – he's used to being the Big Bad. Now, Spike – you know Angel dominated him in the bad old days, so I bet he would go for you being all manly and rugged."

Xander smiled his evil smile again. "I think that can be arranged. Any other ideas for me?" She considered him critically for a moment, and then answered, somewhat reluctantly, "Well, I don't know how far along you guys are or what your intentions are, but there's always blood." At his slightly alarmed look she continued. "I'm just saying, if you wind up getting into blood play there is an element of danger. I don't think Spike would drain you, but there can be consequences from sharing blood." Xander met her eyes, "Did you and Angel ever ..." Her eyes widened. "Oh, no! We weren't that serious. But I know he drinks from Buffy sometimes. I don't know if she ever has from him." She shuddered delicately. "Don't really want to know, either. If you want to drive Spike really crazy, you should put a little of your blood on something he's going to wear tonight. The smell would surround him all night. It would be very, um, erotic. Of course, that's just asking for it once you finally get back here. With that sort of stimulation, you getting bitten would pretty much be a foregone conclusion."

"Honey, I'm home!" Xander and Cordelia both jumped slightly as they heard Spike's voice at the door of the

suite. "OK, let me get him into the other bedroom, then you slip out and go downstairs. I'll send him down when I'm done with him," Cordelia said. Before she could slip out the door, Xander pulled her into a quick hug and whispered his thanks into her ear. "Thank me tomorrow - with details," she admonished, pressing a kiss to his cheek and whisking the bag of tricks out the door with her.

Xander stepped out into the lobby and was immediately surrounded by the girls, who dragged him across the marble floor, chattering excitedly about his new look. Once they reached the others, Xander said, "OK, everybody be still, I want to get a good look at you." The girls quickly fell in line next to their mates and dates. Buffy was wearing a short, low-cut black dress that clung to her curves and emphasized her cleavage. Her legs were covered in filmy black stockings and she wore black shoes that could only be described as "fuck me" pumps. Her blonde hair was piled up on her head to fall in loose waves, small tendrils curved at her temples and ears. Her face was beautifully made up and her lips were a slash of bright red. She stood next to Angel, who was wearing burgundy leather trousers and a fine-weave gray sweater, his hair was gelled to perfection.

Willow was wearing soft, flowing trousers in an emerald green color that contrasted beautifully with her hair and brought out the sparkles in her eyes. She wore a short, fitted jacket of the same green with a silver tank underneath, and silver shoes peeked out from under her cuffs. Oz looked sharp in the camel colored trousers, black turtleneck, and brown leather sport coat he'd had on at dinner. Dawn's long legs were encased

in trim-fitting black pants topped with a sleeveless vest the rich dark color of blood. Black, pointed-toed microfiber boots added three inches to her height. She explained that Jase would meet them shortly, as soon as Cordelia relieved him for baby sitting duty.

While they waited for Spike and Jase, Xander was listening to Angel relate a story about one of the agency's many bizarre cases, when he saw the vampire's head go up. Angel stopped his story in mid-sentence and gawked over Xander's shoulder. Without looking at him, he whispered, "Turn around – you have got to see this." Xander turned slowly. "This" was Spike. His Spike, standing in front of the elevator, staring at him.

Xander ran his eyes appreciatively over his lover, from the floor up. Spike's feet were encased in his usual Doc Martens. His lower body was held in the embrace of skin-tight black leather pants. A silver chain belt was slung around his narrow hips. He wore a soft-looking, white cotton button-up shirt. The top two buttons were undone, and the rolled sleeves were pushed up to just below his elbows. He had several chunky silver rings on his fingers, and a studded leather cuff on one wrist. In the vee of the shirt, a thick silver chain that Xander was sure was a dog's choke collar nestled into the hollow of his pale neck.

Spike's white-blond hair was slicked back on the sides, but he had left the top alone, so loose waves fell over his brow. His eyes were also rimmed with kohl, more heavily than Xander's, and the contrast made his eyes look huge and crystal blue. In his hands Spike was holding his black leather duster. He swirled it around

his shoulders and slipped his arms into the sleeves, then stalked toward the group. Xander met him halfway and, in a quiet but firm tone, said "Stop." Spike froze, and looked at his lover expectantly. Xander moved closer, and drew his breath in quickly at the sight of two small silver hoops piercing Spike's scarred eyebrow, and another in the lobe of his left ear. He leaned forward and tugged one of the eyebrow rings lightly with his teeth. Spike sucked his breath in with a hiss. The human stepped back and smiled into the eyes of his gorgeous lover. "You look ...wonderful." Spike returned the smile. "And, you, luv; you look eminently fuckable yourself."

The elevator chimed behind them and Jase stepped out of the car. Dawn hurried to his side, and shooed Jase, Xander and Spike back to the group. Xander noted that Jase was wearing a pair of steel gray pants and a black tee shirt, topped with an untucked and unbuttoned red silk shirt. He looked at Dawn and wondered if she had any idea of how much her husband resembled the Spike of old. As soon as everyone had admired everyone else, they left for their night out.

Part Nineteen

The line outside of the club called 668 snaked almost to the corner. It was comprised of humans, some demons and the occasional vampire; but only the coolest of each species, of course. Everyone lined up was trying to exhibit their own brand of the L.A.-too-cool-for-the-

venue vibe with varying results. Angel and Spike moved to the front of the group and strode directly up to the large, horned bouncer guarding the door. The demon turned to them with a dismissive look on its face, a look that quickly changed to a smile of welcome and an obsequious gesture when he recognized them. Spike dropped back to rejoin Xander and whispered into his ear. "We had to bust this place up a while back, and I think we made that guy nervous. He's right helpful these days." Xander laughed and rested his hand on Spike's back as they entered the club.

The doors opened into a small lobby that was decorated with industrial-looking furniture and abstract metal sculptures. Dawn collected everyone's jackets to check, half-listening to Spike threaten her life should anything happen to his duster, and then flounced off. When she returned, the group turned and opened another set of double doors that led to the interior of the club. Driving drums and a thundering bass line washed over them. The room was cavernous. Multi-level bars and dance floors crisscrossed the space, and strobes and laser lights flashed. Spike struck out toward the back of the room; the others followed. By the time they caught up to him, he was shaking off his demon visage and gesturing them toward a hastily vacated red velvet sofa that was nestled in a corner. Striding off again, Spike returned with two armchairs and arranged them across from the sofa. Angel settled into one of the chairs and pulled Buffy onto his lap. Xander turned to Spike and lifted his fingers to his mouth in the international "want a beer?" signal. Spike smiled and nodded. Xander grabbed Oz's sleeve and they headed for the bar.

They returned with drinks to find Angel and Buffy guarding the seats. At Xander's questioning look, Buffy pointed out to the dance floor. Xander easily picked out Jase's red shirt; he was dancing with Dawn and Willow. Buffy pointed again, and Xander's eyes came to rest on Spike. The vampire's back was to him. He was dancing with his head thrown back, lost in the music. Spike's leather-clad hips were moving with sinuous grace, and as Xander watched, one hand rose and ran slowly down the long pale neck, fingers twisting into the chain at his throat. Xander took a long swallow of his beer, and then let his mouth curve up into a broad smile. He couldn't believe that this beautiful vampire was dancing for him; showing him all the things he had to look forward to. It was one of the sexiest things he had ever seen. He knew that Spike was playing to him, and he loved the blatancy of his lover's actions.

The song ended, and another began on its heels. At the change of music, Spike turned around, his hand was still at his neck, and his eyes met Xander's with a frankly sexual look. The vampire stalked toward his prey with a rolling, hip-thrusting gait. Tearing his eyes away from Spike's, Xander let his gaze crawl down the slim body. Spike's erection was obvious in his painted-on pants, and the human felt an answering hardness stir. Stopping in front of his lover, Spike removed the beer bottle from Xander's suddenly nerveless fingers and tilted it up to drink. Xander watched his adam's apple bob, then waited until Spike returned the bottle to him. He dangled the bottle by his side and lowered his dark head to place his lips against Spike's throat. He could feel, rather than hear, a low, rumbling laugh, which changed to a gasp when he bit down on the tender flesh and curled his hand around the vampire's

hard hip at the same time, bringing their lower bodies into contact. Xander bit down again, and thrust his hips up once, then stepped back. He reached to the table behind him and handed Spike his own beer.

Xander felt a small hand in his and found himself being pulled onto the dance floor by a determined Buffy. He shot Spike a small smile, handed the vampire his beer and allowed his friend to lead him over to the others. As they danced, Spike moved to sit across from Angel. He looked over at Oz and saw that the werewolf was sitting on the edge of the sofa, his hands clutching a beer between his knees, his eyes focused on the dancing witch. Angel sipped from his glass of whiskey and looked at his grand-child. He knew the other vampire would hear him easily, so he spoke in a normal tone of voice despite the din of the club.

"What are you doing with Xander, Spike?" Spike tilted his beer up and took a drink. His answer was succinct. "Foreplay." Angel smiled broadly. "That I can see – I meant in general, not tonight specifically." Spike's expression turned serious, and he looked the older vampire in the eye. "I don't know exactly what's happening. He just showed up, and ... ah, hell." His voice and eyes both dropped away, and he looked down at his hands. Angel reached out and touched the younger vampire lightly on the knee. "William, all I know is that you've been more like yourself the past couple of days than you have been in years. I'm glad to see you like this, but ..." Angel's voice also trailed off, and he removed his hand from Spike's knee. Blue eyes met broody brown ones, and an understanding look passed between them. Finally, Spike spoke, and even he heard the note of desperation in his voice. "I have

to take a chance, Angel. I just have to." Angel simply nodded, and they both turned to watch the dancers.

Spike felt his mouth drop open, and glanced at Angel, seeing a similarly gobsmacked expression on the other vampire's face. Xander and Buffy were dancing together. Buffy had her back to the tall man, and one of her arms was twined up and around his neck. Her other hand stretched around her waist to clasp one of Xander's that rested lightly on her hip. His other hand was splayed over her ribs, the thumb resting slightly below the curve of her full breast, his long fingers reaching to the center of her abdomen. Buffy's eyes were closed, her head lolling back against the hard chest behind her as her hips moved to the music. Xander's head was bowed over hers, and it looked like she was whispering something in his ear. She twisted her head up and smiled at him; opening her eyes and watching him throw his head back to laugh. Their rhythm never faltered as they laughed, and Spike could see the roll of his lover's hips against Buffy's.

God, they look hot, Spike thought, admiring how Xander's dark good looks were set off by Buffy's gleaming blondness. He wondered if he and Xander looked as striking together then smugly decided that they probably did. Maybe even better, since he was so much paler than the slayer. He turned to his grandsire. "Close your mouth, mate, you look like an utter git. And go rein in your girl; she's getting awfully touchy with what's mine." He softened the snarled comment with a sardonic smile, and the two vampires rose to claim their dates.

Xander leaned down to whisper in Buffy's ear, "It

worked; here come the territorial insane vampires." She turned her head and giggled against his cheek. "We've only got a couple more seconds, let's make it good." As the two vampires approached, the Slayer and one of her oldest friends moved their hips in unison. Xander kept his head bent to her neck and swept his hand up from her hip to just below her breast, while as a final detail she caught her lush bottom lip between her pearly teeth and closed her eyes.

Spike gestured to his grand-sire, and Angel stepped in front of Buffy at the exact moment that Spike stepped behind Xander. Angel put his hands on Buffy's hips, and Spike put one hand on Xander's waist and reached the other across both bodies to rest on Angel's shoulder. The four bodies moved in perfect harmony for a moment, and then Buffy and Xander broke apart, pressing away from one another and against their respective lovers. Buffy looked over her shoulder and winked at Xander, and then smiled brilliantly. "Oh, so you and the slayer were playing a little 'taunt the vampire', eh?" The low growl in his ear sent a shiver up Xander's spine. He leaned his head back and let it roll on Spike's shoulder. "Did it work?" Xander's wry question turned into a gasp as Spike ground his leather-clad erection against the ass in front of him. It became instantly clear to Xander that Spike was not wearing anything beneath his leathers.

Crushed into a corner of the back seat of Dawn's SUV on the way home, the night came back to Xander in bright flashes. Xander and Buffy's exhibition had set the tone for the night. Numerous drinks had been consumed, and the group had come together and

broken apart numerous times on the dance floor in various permutations.

FLASH

Spike had Xander pinned against the wall next to the red velvet sofa. The vampire's hard body ground into his, hips thrusting with the same rhythm that his cool tongue plundered the human's hot mouth. Both of Spike's hands twined in the sable hair, pulling their mouths together. One of Xander's hands gripped Spike's hip, and his other was tangled in Willow's titan tresses as she sat on the sofa, straddling Oz's hips, and kissing him with abandon. The circle was completed as Oz's warm hand rested at the small of Xander's back.

FLASH

All three girls laughing hysterically as Xander was sandwiched between Angel and Spike, dancing. Xander trying desperately to deny to himself that he was turned on by the fact that Angel's erection was pressing against him while he was pressing his against Spike.

FLASH

Willow, very tipsy, sitting on Xander's lap in one of the plush armchairs with her arms around his neck and her warm lips resting against his temple. Spike leaning in as if to kiss him, and then turning at the last moment to run his tongue from Willow's pointed chin to her ear, causing her to squeal and blush.

FLASH

Dawn asking Jase if she could, and then kissing Spike's shocked mouth, then blushing furiously before kissing her husband deeply.

FLASH

Spike regaining his composure and asking Dawn for a repeat, with tongue, and laughing at her when she backpedaled away from him.

FLASH

Xander looking out onto the dance floor in time to see Angel lean down and run his tongue slowly over the claim mark on Buffy's neck and seeing the shudder that ran through her body, even at a distance.

FLASH

Returning from the restroom and seeing Spike sprawled out on the steps that led to a higher level of the dance floor; legs spread, body relaxed, being chatted up by two gorgeous girls. Seeing the looks on those same girls' faces as he slid down behind his lover on the step and trailed one hand into the open collar of the vampire's shirt to tweak a nipple, causing the blonde to close his eyes, groan audibly and arch back against him.

FLASH

Pinning Spike against the exposed brick of the back wall of the club and kissing him senseless, then noticing that Angel was doing the same to Buffy right

next to them.

They stumbled into the elevator in a pack. The two vampires were awash in the human pheromones, and Spike knew that his eyes were flashing as yellow as his grandsire's when they shared a look. The elevator was filled with the sounds of kisses and soft moans, broken only when Xander asked breathlessly, "Whose hand is on my ass?" and Jase answered, "Sorry!" The elevator stopped on the fourth floor, and Dawn and Jase and Willow and Oz stumbled toward their rooms, waving distractedly back at their friends. The doors slid shut again. Xander whispered a question into Spike's ear, and a pale hand shot out to the control panel, pushing the "stop" button.

The two couples stood slightly apart, and then Xander leaned over very slowly and kissed Buffy. Her jaw dropped in shock, and he took the opportunity to slide his tongue into her mouth. Only their mouths touched as he explored the lips he had wanted to kiss for years. Her tongue met his, and she tilted her head for a better angle. They kissed for a long moment, and then broke apart, putting a tiny space between their lips. She gestured upward with her eyebrows, and Xander turned his head enough to see that Angel and Spike were also kissing. Where Buffy and Xander's kiss was a gentle exploration, the vampires' kiss was brutal; both were in game face, and Xander could see a trickle of blood running down Angel's chin. On impulse, Xander twisted his neck enough to allow him to gather the small rivulet of blood on his tongue. He marveled for a moment at the smoothness of Angel's skin, then turned and kissed Buffy again; sharing the small drops of blood he had collected. As he swallowed it, he felt a

current of electricity run through his body.

Spike and Angel moved apart, both licking blood off of their lips. Spike's hand went to the control panel again, and the elevator car began to move. Xander kissed his lover and tasted the mixed blood in his mouth. The elevator chimed and the doors slid open. Angel and Spike exchanged a look, and at Spike's small shake of the head, Angel pushed them out of the car and hit the button for the penthouse.

In room 407Jase had Dawn pinned against the back of the door and was unbuttoning the small gold buttons that ran down the front of her vest while he kissed her deeply, sweeping his tongue through the hot cavern of her eager mouth. She was pulling at his red silk over shirt, stripping it off his shoulders, and breaking his grip on her buttons to jerk the cuffs over his hands. He finished with her buttons and paused to cup her braless breasts as they spilled out from between the sides of the vest, milky white against its bloody hue. One hand tweaked a dusky nipple and the other slid to her waist to unbutton and unzip her pants.

Dawn used her toes to push her boots off and began tugging at her husband's tee shirt, pulling the hem from the waistband of his jeans and rubbing her hands over the sharp planes of his chest. He moaned into her mouth, and then broke the kiss to pull the shirt off and kick off his own shoes. He buried his mouth between her breasts and continued working on the zipper of her pants. The fastenings finally gave way, and he pushed them over her hips as she wriggled out of them. Jase straightened and ground his denim-covered erection against his wife's body, causing her to gasp and draw

her long legs up to curve around his waist. He pushed her harder against the door so he could move his hands, and as his tongue slid into her mouth he pressed two fingers up into her exposed wetness. She gasped into his mouth and moved her hands around to unfasten his jeans and push them down his hips to free his hard cock.

She stroked him for a moment, and then used his shoulders for leverage to impale herself on his hardness. She slid down his shaft, and as she felt him fully sheathed inside her she exploded in an instant orgasm. Jase panted into her mouth as he tried to hold back his own release, feeling his wife's body pulse around him. He stood perfectly still as shudders wracked the body between his and the door. As soon as Dawn's wetness stopped clutching at him, Jase started to move within her, bracing her body against the door and thrusting up into her strongly. Her heels drummed on his back, and she dug her nails into his shoulders. Their bodies became slick with sweat, and their bellies slapped and slid. Jase put his hands on her hips in a bruising grip and pumped into her with long, fast strokes. He felt his orgasm build, and pushed one hand between them to find that tiny bit of engorged flesh that would send her over the edge again. His fingers closed on the nub and pressed, and Dawn's scream and Jase's groan met in each other's mouths as they reached their mutual completion.

In room 442 Willow and Oz had actually made it to the bed. Oz had stripped her clothes from her body with slow thoroughness, then lowered her to the bed and simply looked at every inch of her, a small smile on his face. Willow basked under his gaze, tucking her hands

behind her head and crooking one leg prettily. Oz used his fingers to trace every part of her that his eyes had touched, and then followed with his lips and tongue. Willow stayed in her reclining position, knowing that this slow, worshipful exploration was his favorite activity, and that her patience would be rewarded. Finally he lifted his head from her body and began stripping off his clothes. He joined her on the bed, and then resumed his mapping of her body, rolling her over to touch and lick every inch of her back. Roughened, callused fingertips and soft pointed tongue brought her to a fever pitch. Once her moans and vocalizations became incoherent half-words, he finally pulled her up on all fours and entered her from behind in one long, sure stroke. They both howled.

In the penthouse, Angel's long body was sprawled out on the floor of the living room. He was on his back and Buffy's slim, golden body rose over him as she pushed herself up and down on him. She braced her hands on his chest and leaned forward to change the angle at which his cock entered her body on each of her hard thrusts. Angel's large hands cupped her breasts and his fingers closed on her hard pink nipples, eliciting deep moans from her mouth.

In the hall outside suite 501 Xander's hands shook violently as he tried to unlock the door. He growled with frustration, and then finally managed to get the door unlocked and open. He strode into the room, and then turned to look at Spike. The vampire leaned against the wall across the hall, taking and releasing unnecessary breaths, fighting for control. Xander looked into his eyes and ordered "get in here – now." The blond pushed off from the wall and stalked into the

room, stopping about a foot from his lover. Up close, Xander could see that his blue eyes were rimmed in yellow, and this outward signal of the barely restrained demon caused a shudder to run through his body. He tilted his head to the side and smiled at Spike. "I'm guessing that I don't get to be in charge tonight?"

The eyes before him flashed completely yellow, and Xander gasped. Spike shook his head, trying to dispel the almost painful urge to allow his face to change; his eyes switched between blue and yellow several times. Xander closed the distance between them and placed a hand on either side of the pale face before him. He leaned in and kissed Spike gently, then pulled back and looked him right in the eyes. "Don't hold back with me," he whispered. "Let it go, Will. I want to see you." The husky tremble in Xander's voice broke Spike's control, and his face rippled and changed; his forehead furrowing and fangs dropping.

Xander looked into the face before him, and then leaned forward to carefully kiss the fanged mouth. He ran his tongue over the familiar lips, and then slipped it inside to trace the new contours there. He ran the tip over the sharp teeth, and then started exploring the long, slightly curved fangs. Xander could feel their razor-sharpness. He carefully wrapped his tongue around one and sucked gently. Spike groaned and slammed their bodies together at the sensation. Xander sucked harder and felt his lover go wild thrusting against him.

Spike broke the kiss and panted harshly. He twined one hand into Xander's hair and roughly pulled his head back so that their eyes met. "Luv, I'm going to

have to apologize in advance," he gritted out between pants. "For what?" Xander's breathing was also unsteady. "For how fucking sore you're gonna be tomorrow."

Xander relaxed into the soothing hot water. He groaned a little as certain body parts protested the motion. Spike shot him a contrite look and went back to rubbing his feet. It was all Xander could do to not laugh. Who would have imagined that Spike, master vampire, would turn into Florence Nightingale after an evening of what Xander had to admit was spectacularly athletic sex. Spike's advance apology had not been in jest.

The hours of arousal coupled with the small amount of bloodplay in the elevator had brought the demon to the forefront, and Xander bore evidence of the wild encounter. After a careful inventory of body parts he decided that his injuries consisted of some mildly strained muscles, numerous finger-mark bruises, a tired jaw, an almost-healed, inch-long gash in his tongue, and a very sore ass.

He considered Cordelia's advice from the night before and tried to decide if he wanted to correct her on the turnaround time point. Spike's erection had not waned at all until after the third time he had spent into Xander's body; snarling and sinking his fangs into his own forearm next to where Xander's head was buried

in the pillow. When Spike had finally pulled away from Xander, neither had been terribly surprised to find themselves bloody; although Spike had been horrified and immediately began apologizing. Xander had stopped the apologies by grabbing the vampire by the chin and kissing him deeply, not caring that Spike was still in full game face. As soon as the cool tongue had started moving in his mouth, Xander had wrapped his tongue around a fang and slashed it open on the razor edge.

Yellow eyes had snapped open to meet his as the hot blood splashed into their joined mouths. Xander had felt Spike bite his own tongue to mingle their blood, and then the vampire had closed his lips on Xander's tongue and sucked. Xander felt his eyes roll back as he came harder than he ever had before in his life. He barely registered the inhuman sounds Spike made, as he also climaxed again. Xander had come back to his senses to find his lover tenderly licking him clean. Spike took particular care to run his tongue over the shallow gouges he'd clawed into Xander's thighs when the boy's rich blood had flooded into his mouth unexpectedly. As soon as he'd finished there, he had flipped Xander over easily and turned his tongue to any other sore areas he could find.

Xander had been quite gratified to find out that it was possible to have an orgasm simply from being rimmed. Especially if the person rimming you had supernatural strength that extended to his tongue and the added benefit of not needing to breathe. As soon as Xander recovered, he dragged his seriously aroused lover off of the sticky, bloody, sodden bed and into the marble shower. There he had earned his sore jaw by giving

Spike an extended blowjob, bringing the vampire to the brink of coming again and again, then backing off to draw out the sweet torture. After much babbling and begging, Xander had finally allowed the vampire his release, swallowing against the cock that was driven to the edge of his throat as Spike's body rippled around the four fingers wedged tightly up his ass and he poured out his essence into Xander. The trembling blond had sunk to his knees in the shower, the two men clinging together under the pouring hot water until lassitude had threatened to overtake them. They had fallen damply into Xander's bed and crashed immediately into deep sleep, sated and exhausted bodies intertwined.

Xander had come awake in the afternoon to find Spike lying flat on his back, hands behind his head, staring unblinkingly at the ceiling. The blond head hadn't turned to follow as the human went into the bathroom, or upon his return. Xander settled himself on his side, tousled head propped on one hand. He laid his other hand gently on the unmoving chest of his lover and asked, "What's with the broody, bleach boy?"

Spike's eyes closed and he let out a sighing breath. Without opening his eyes, he said softly, "I'm so sorry, luv." After a moment, Xander replied, "For what, Will?" Spike sat up and shrugged off Xander's hand, sitting cross-legged on the bed with the sheets pooling in his lap, where he started twisting the material between his agitated hands. Not meeting the dark eyes that searched his face, he began to speak in a low, miserable voice.

"God, Xan – I didn't mean to ... I lost control and I ...I

hurt you." He hung his head. "Everything got so crazy ... and it's been so long ... and I wanted you so much. I couldn't hold back." The vampire's voice began to rise, and Xander could feel the self-loathing in it. "Christ, Xan – I fucked you bloody and damned if I didn't love it."

Xander leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the top of the bowed head, then slipped his hand between the ones twisting the sheet, gripping tightly. He leaned closer and placed his lips beside the vampire's ear and spoke in a low, husky voice. "I liked it, Will. I loved it. I enjoyed every minute. It was rough and harsh and wild and I've never felt anything like it in my life. Feeling you tear into me, feeling the pleasure and the pain and the hot blood, oh God, it was a revelation." He knew Spike could feel the shudder that ran through him, and he flushed with equal parts arousal and embarrassment at the words he was saying. He had felt the pain in the vampire's voice, and knew that Spike believed himself to be a monster. Xander was trying to let him know that everything they had done together had been good, a source of excitement and pleasure.

Xander sat back and looked at the man before him. "Spike ... Will, look at me." When the blue eyes finally met his, Xander smiled a small smile into them. "When you ... went all 'grrr'? That was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen. I loved watching you let go, knowing that all of that power and lust was for me." Xander's smile grew as he watched heat bloom in those crystal depths, chasing away the haunted look he loathed. He continued speaking.

"Being with you is like nothing else in the world. Being

with Shari, that was all about sweetness and gentleness – and you and I have that, too. But you give me something I've never had – you give me your strength and your wildness and your darkness. I know we can do anything together, and you won't hold back and you'll take me farther than I think I can go. And I know you'd never really hurt me. Much." Spike's head had come up, and Xander was staring into his eyes, pleading for Spike to understand him, to know what he was talking about. The blond's eyes were wide, and he smiled suddenly. "Really?" he asked. "It was good – all of it?"

Xander counted on his fingers. "Allow me to sum up. Sex with you is good. In fact, it's amazing. You getting all 'grrr' during the amazing sex: also good. A little pain: yep, good. Oh, and vampire spit: extra good for healing the damage from the previous good stuff. Vampire blood: again with the good; it kind of makes me feel zingy – like drinking seven or eight Red Bulls." He grinned at the vampire and received an answering smile. Xander continued, "You getting broody? Well, that's bad. I hate it when you get all Angel-y on me."

Xander laughed when Spike picked up a bed pillow and bopped him on the head for that comment. He leaned in and initiated a little wrestling, then hissed when several of his injuries made themselves known. Spike's eyes got stormy and he demanded, "Are you still hurting?" Xander shifted a little on the bed and grimaced. "I'm a little sore, but it's not bad. It probably won't help me much in the sparring match tonight, but it was worth it." At that, Spike growled and flipped Xander over onto his stomach. With one hand, he pushed the human flat on the bed. "Stay there," was

his terse command as he strode off to the bathroom, unconcernedly naked. Xander waited, and soon heard his lover come back to his side.

Spike drizzled lightly scented oil on Xander's back and started to knead the abused muscles. The low groans from the body beneath him let him know when he was hitting all the right spots. As he worked the supple muscles of the human's back, Spike thought about the conversation they'd just had. Spike had awoken refreshed and sated. He had lain in bed, remembering the night before. When his mind came to the memory of pulling away from Xander as the human knelt before him and seeing blood, the vampire had felt almost physically ill. He recalled how Xander had stilled his apologies with the wholly unexpected gift of his blood. Spike began to grin as a thought hit him. The grin turned to chuckles, then outright laughter, and soon he was almost lying on top of Xander, shaking with the strength of his mirth. "What's so funny?" The muffled question came from beneath. Spike got himself under control and went back to rubbing the oil into sore muscles. "I'm sorry, luv. I just had a funny thought. I was thinking about what you said, and it came to me: you fuck like a vampire."

Xander twisted from the waist so he could look at his lover over his shoulder. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asked, somewhat indignantly. Spike pushed him back down gently. "Nothing bad, pet. I just mean that in the vamp world sex is right up there with blood and violence: the big three. Those are three things that your average vampire doesn't hold back on – we do it all, balls to the wall and no holds barred. Most humans have a lot of hang-ups about sex; worrying if

something is bad or wrong. Vamps don't care – if it gets you off, it's good."

"I can get behind that kind of thinking," Xander murmured. They were silent for a while, both enjoying the massage. "Will?" Xander's voice was low. "Yes, luv?" Spike answered him. "Um, during ... well, during, why did you bite yourself instead of me?" Spike hesitated, unable to read from the human's tone what answer he expected. "I'd never bite you, Xan. Not without your permission. No matter how much I wanted to. I do have that much self-control. Barely." He softened the sentiment with a short laugh. After a long pause, Xander said, "I was just wondering what it was like, because when you drew on the cut in my tongue last night, I was pretty sure all of my brains came out of my cock. I guess a real bite is pretty intense." Spike worked his way lower on the human's back before answering. "Intense is an understatement, mate. The bite is...well, it's everything. Even when it's just feeding, the one getting drained goes out on the highest of highs. Why do you think people like Buffy's farm boy whore themselves out to vamps? But when it's during sex, well – you felt something of it."

Xander didn't answer, and Spike continued his ministrations on his lover's back. His hands trailed down Xander's sides and over his hips to knead his strong buttocks. Xander hissed as the manipulation caused sensitive, sore flesh to rub together. Spike dipped his head, and Xander felt the warm push of the vampire's muscular tongue stroking against his tender opening. He gasped and arched his back to increase the contact. He rose up slightly on his knees and leaned back as Spike began to rim him in earnest.

Xander groaned and thrashed as the slick, strong muscle pushed in and out of his body. Finally, he could stand it no longer, and he came all over the last set of clean sheets in the suite, screaming, "Oh, God, Will! So good, oh fuck, yes!" Spike had allowed him to rest while the vampire drew him a hot bath, then had carried him to the bathroom, lowered him into the water and proceeded to wash him and rub his feet.

After twenty minutes in the bath, watching Spike attend to him while the vampire was sporting a painfully hard erection, Xander came out of his reverie and leered at his lover. "Why don't you climb in here and we'll do some underwater fucking experiments?" Spike shot him a dark look. "I'm not fucking you until you're healed, pet," he growled. "However ..." he got an evil glint in his eye. The vampire moved with his usual grace to the side of the tub and climbed in, settling with one knee on either side of Xander's waist. He braced his thighs and knees against the warm, wet body below him and wrapped his hand around his erection.

Xander marveled at the erotic picture before him. His eyes were locked on Spike's hand, which moved with punishing speed on his flesh, sliding his slick foreskin forward and back as he masturbated over the body of his lover. Xander's hands rose, one cupping and tugging at the vampire's balls, the other sliding back between the tight globes of his ass. There was enough oil in the water to lubricate his fingers; he pushed one inside Spike's grasping channel, and then quickly added another, curling them to hit the exact spot that made the vampire howl. Thrusting forward into his own hand and back against Xander's fingers, Spike worked

himself to his orgasm, staring down into the face below him. At the very last moment, Xander tipped his head forward and took Spike's cock down to the root, swallowing every drop as the vampire came with a whine, his forward motion splashing water all over the floor.

Part Twenty

Jack and Lily walked down the row of adults, giving everyone hugs and kisses. At the end of the row, Cordelia knelt to hold her twins close for a long moment. Their father stood by the door, waiting to take them for the week. Xander could see that this was the usual order of things by the way everyone had fallen into line to say goodbye, while checking to make sure the kids had everything they needed. He and Willow were the only ones who had no idea what was happening, so they just stood at the far end of the line and got their hugs and kisses like everyone else. Once the kids had departed and the group dispersed, Willow turned to Cordelia. "You probably don't care to hear this, Cordy, but your ex is gorgeous." The brunette turned a wry smile on her friend. "Oh, he's really hot, but he's totally self-centered. Actor, you know." She paused. "And before you say it, Xander, I will – there's only room for one egomaniac in a relationship, and in my relationships, I'm it." The three exchanged a smile.

They walked into the kitchen and sat down at the table, where Buffy was already seated. Cordelia burst out

laughing as both Xander and Willow seated themselves with exaggerated care and grimaces. She looked around the table and said, mock-indignantly, "Did every adult in this hotel get fucked through the mattress last night except for me?" Xander, Willow and Buffy all flushed bright red, and Cordelia laughed some more. She turned to Buffy, "Why aren't you sitting funny, too?" Buffy replied, "Slayer healing; it does come in handy sometimes." Their laughter trailed off as Spike wandered into the kitchen holding a cordless phone. He handed it to Xander and demanded, "What's so bloody funny?" when the girls giggled.

Xander stood up from the table to take the call away from the noisy girls and vampire. He returned to the table a few moments later to find Spike grinning and all three girls completely red-faced. He sank into his chair and buried his face in his hands. "Christ, Spike – what did you tell them?" he groaned. "Nothing, pet. We were having a serious scientific discussion about the healing properties of vampire spit, and the birds got embarrassed, that's all." Xander banged his head on the table. He kept his head down until the conversation turned to the upcoming sparring. Buffy told the group that Jase, Angel and Oz had gone down to the gym to set up, and Xander shared that the phone call had been from his Master, confirming that the group would arrive in an hour and a half.

Just as Xander was going to ask Buffy where Dawn had disappeared to, the girl in question strode through the door juggling huge bags of Chinese takeout, followed by her daughter. Buffy phoned down to the gym, and soon the gang was spread out in the lobby, feasting and chatting. After the final fortune cookie, Xander

addressed the group. "OK, who's sparring?" Angel, Buffy and Spike raised their hands. Xander nodded at them and continued. "So, all supernatural beings – please refrain from displays of preternatural strength and flexibility if at all possible. All non-living beings," he eyed Angel and Spike, "please try to remember to breathe at least occasionally. No vamping out, and let's keep the growling and snarling to a minimum. Also, during sparring, try to avoid low blows and especially dirty street fighting moves. Most of these people know forms and a little bit of freestyle stuff. They have not been doing this for ten to two hundred years like the rest of us."

He looked around the room, his eyes coming to rest on Spike. "You'll meet a man who I, and all the other students, will refer to as 'Master' or "Master Alan". You can just call him 'Alan', since you aren't his students. The others will call me 'Sifu', it means 'teacher' – it's my title within the school. There will be some bowing – you don't have to do it, though it's customary to bow to your opponent when you begin to spar. When in doubt, if somebody bows to you, bow back." He smiled and explained, "When we first start, there will be a very short formal bowing in. You don't participate – you can just hang back while we do it. It's no big thing. Then, Alan will introduce me, and I'll introduce you. Then Alan will get us started. That's all."

Buffy raised her hand in the air. Xander smiled and gestured for her to speak. "I hate to do the girly thing and ask the fashion question, but what do we wear?" Xander laughed. "That's a valid question, Buff. Just wear drawstring pants and a tank top or tee shirt. Just don't wear black. Wearing black is a black belt

privilege. Technically, if you were visiting a school, you'd wear all white." Xander laughed when Spike scowled at him. He locked eyes with his lover and grinned. "Sorry, Will – no fashionable black for you this time."

Everyone laughed and stood to gather the empty takeout containers. All heads turned when a buzzing noise sounded through the lobby. Cordelia strode across the lobby, tossing the explanation, "Door" over her shoulder. She reappeared after a moment, leading a young man dressed in black to Xander, who crossed the floor to meet them.

"Brooks!" he exclaimed, "I didn't know you were coming. Good to see you, man!" As Xander approached, Brooks dropped the weapons bag he was carrying and met the other man with a bone-crunching hug. Xander stepped back and led him to the group. "Guys, this is Brooks Donovan. He used to live in Atlanta and moved out here a few years ago." Xander introduced Brooks to each of his friends, noting that while Spike smiled and shook his hand, the vampire's eyes flashed the tiniest sliver of gold. Xander didn't stop to analyze the small bit of satisfaction he felt at the evidence of Spike's possessiveness. The girls seemed suitably impressed, and Xander couldn't blame them. Brooks was almost six feet tall, had piercing green eyes in a handsome, angular face and his jet-black hair trailed down his back in a braid that hung to slightly below his waist. He was, in a word, gorgeous.

After the introductions, Brooks apologized. "Xan man, sorry I'm early, but we finished early on the set – the leading man had an emergency manicure or some

other Hollywood crisis, so I thought I'd swing by. " He smiled sheepishly. "Are you an actor?" Buffy asked. Brooks laughed, "No, I'm a stunt designer." Xander dove into the conversation. "Well, Brooksie – Cordelia here is an aspiring actress. Why don't the two of you do shop talk while the rest of us get changed? Then we'll go downstairs and warm up." Brooks agreed and walked off with Cordelia happily chatting to him; she flashed Xander a grateful smile as they walked away.

Buffy, Angel, Spike and Xander boarded the elevator. As soon as the doors closed, Buffy turned to Xander and said, "Brooks is hot – is he straight?" Xander laughed and replied, "Straight as an arrow, Buff. Why do you ask?" She grumbled, "Well, apparently I can't really trust my instincts anymore. You and Willow both turn out to be bent and I was clueless both times, so I figure I better just ask." The men laughed. "He's a great guy. I think Cordy likes him," Xander raised an eyebrow and the others chorused "Duh!" as the elevator doors opened on the fifth floor.

Inside the suite, Spike trotted into Xander's bedroom and leaned against the doorframe. "Will this do?" he asked, indicating his clothes. "I didn't have a lot of white." The vampire was wearing a pair of navy drawstring pants and a ribbed, white wife-beater t-shirt. Xander strode to the door and answered the query with a slow, gentle kiss. "You look good, baby," he whispered against cool lips. Spike sucked in a breath and then let it out with a laugh. "Oh, very clever, pet," he groused. "You almost had me there. " He pushed Xander back a step. "I'm not fucking you til you're healed. Furthermore, I'm certainly not fucking you while everyone we know and a handful of strangers

are waiting for us in the lobby.”

“Prude.”

“Git.”

“Victorian.”

“Wanker.”

“Well, yeah – since you won’t fuck me.” Xander whined. They both laughed, and the brunet tugged a black tunic-style uniform top on over his black pants and tank, leaving the shirt’s red frog closures open. He draped a black cloth belt over one shoulder and walked into the parlor for his shoes, glancing with regret at the bed they’d messed up earlier.

Spike came to stand in front of Xander where the human sat on the sofa tying his shoe, and stroked his thumb lightly over his warm lips. “Are you doing alright, luv?” he asked. Xander parted his lips and brushed the cool digit with his tongue briefly before he reached up and took Spike’s hand, using it to draw himself upright. He sighed.

“It’s been a big couple of days, Will.” Xander leaned their brows together, staring into his vampire’s eyes. “I feel ... so different. It’s like a huge weight has been lifted, by coming back, and just by telling the whole story. It feels good to have it all out in the open.” The two men shared a small smile. Xander continued, “But, telling the story has started the next part, and that’s the part where we have to find Drusilla and I have to face her and kill her. And I’m putting my friends, the people I love best, right in front of the thing that killed my wife and child. I’ve gotta tell you, that scares the hell out of me.”

Spike closed his eyes and rolled his brow against Xander's. "We're not exactly rank amateurs at this, you know, Xan. Every one of us, save Sara, has killed a vamp or twenty in our day." Xander looked at the pale, angular face before him, taking the opportunity afforded by Spike's closed eyes to stare. When the blue eyes opened languidly, the human closed his and let out a shaky breath, which ghosted across the vampire's lips. "I just don't want to lose anyone else, Will. More to the point, I don't want to lose you. I just found you." Xander's voice cracked on the last word, and Spike closed the distance between them, enfolding his lover in his arms, holding him tightly. He whispered against sable hair, "This time, nobody loses anybody. I'm not giving you up." The two men stood in the embrace for long moments, dark hair resting on ivory shoulder, pale hair standing out in sharp relief against Xander's black uniform. Finally, as they shifted apart, Xander tilted his head to give Spike a long, soft, chaste kiss; a kiss that took the vampire's unneeded breath away; a kiss that held trust and hope and affection and caring. Spike kissed his lover in return, pouring out all of the same emotions; recognizing that he was losing his heart to the sweet, damaged mortal before him, and refusing to be sad about it.

Back in the elevator, Spike disentangled his hand from Xander's reluctantly. "We better knock off the nancy-boy hand holding in front of the guests," he observed wryly. "They might not understand." He was surprised when Xander grabbed his hand firmly and carried it to his lips for a kiss. "Spike, everyone in my dojo knows I'm bi; I dated a guy who studied there before Shari and I got together." He laughed out loud at Spike's flummoxed expression, and then continued softly. "I

had too many secrets growing up. I decided a long time ago to just be who I am. If other people don't like it, they can fuck right off." He kissed Spike's hand again and then dropped it. "That said, we probably should be discreet, just so it doesn't turn into a question-fest." He paused, looking into his lover's eyes. "Thanks for thinking about it, though. It means a lot that you'd want to protect me, protect us." They shared a smile, and Spike followed Xander out of the elevator, shaking his head. How little I know about this man, Spike thought.

Spike trailed Xander across the lobby, still lost in thought. His head came up sharply when he heard Xander exclaim "Master!" and hurry across the marble floor to a man standing with Brooks and Cordelia; a group of black-clad students ranged behind them. Spike stopped in his tracks when Xander bowed deeply to the man, who returned the courtesy. The other students then bowed to Xander, who bowed back. Once the formalities were done, the whole group surrounded Xander and everyone began talking to him at once. Spike hung back and observed the chaos.

Xander first spoke to the man he'd called Master. Alan, Spike corrected himself, in an effort to silence the growl that was building in his chest. Xander leaned down to speak to Alan, and Spike noted with sharp satisfaction that the man was short. Really short – at least four inches shorter than his own modest five foot ten. Spike laughed himself for being so elated about the man's lack of stature.

Alan appeared to be in his mid-forties, had curly, graying hair and glasses, and wore a uniform identical

to Xander's, except that where the belt Xander was tying around his waist had four red stripes on one end, Alan's had seven red and yellow chevrons. The man looked strong and athletic. Spike couldn't wait to fight him.

Turning his attention from Alan, Xander stepped forward and grabbed one of the students in a bear hug, spinning around slowly. As the other person's back was turned to Spike, he could see that it was a petite woman, who had a long, dark ponytail hanging down her back. Xander's face was buried between her neck and shoulder, and from her dusky skin tone, Spike could tell that she was Asian. He felt a tightening in his chest when he realized that this is what Xander and Shari would have looked like together. As Xander released the girl and set her on her feet, he dropped a kiss on top of her head. Xander's eyes met Spike's across the lobby, and Spike could see the tears that hovered there. He started forward to join the group, but hung back as Buffy and Angel exited the elevator, both dressed in workout gear, Buffy's all white, Angel's all gray.

The three advance to the group. When they neared, Buffy spoke quietly, knowing only the vampires would hear her. "They love him." Spike gestured toward three men who were hanging back from the fray. "Except for Moe, Larry and Curly there; I don't think they know him," he observed. Buffy shot him a look. "You know what I mean." Spike looked back at her. "I do, Slayer. I know exactly what you mean." By the look that passed between them, Spike realized that, for once, he and Buffy were on the same wavelength, both pleased that Xander had people in his life that cared about him

the way that his Sunnydale family had, and his real family hadn't. With a nod the Slayer and vampires turned to the group, Buffy wading into the center to throw her arm around Xander, demanding, "Introduce me!" Xander laughed and pulled her close, announcing to the group, "Everybody, this is Buffy; Buffy, this is everybody." Buffy's laughter rang out as the whole group replied in unison, roaring, "Hi, Buffy!"

Xander gestured to the mass of people and said, "Let's all go downstairs to the gym – we'll do the introductions there." The students gathered their duffels and weapons bags from the floor, and Spike noticed that Xander shouldered Alan's bag, respectfully leading him to the front of the group. It took several trips of the elevator to get everyone down to the basement gym. The room was enormous and well appointed. One end held a Universal Gym weight setup as well as a stair stepper, elliptical trainer, two stationary bikes and two treadmills. Another corner was set up with two heavy bags, two speed bags and a practice dummy for boxing. There was a large expanse of open floor, and pads and weapons were racked the same way as Spike's.

The walls were painted, but devoid of mirrors; one of the walls at the short end of the room was decorated with a large, half-finished mural. Looking more closely at it, Xander realized that the mural was of a woodland scene populated with fanciful creatures that looked familiar. He saw a fairy that looked suspiciously like Dawn, and another that he knew was wearing Tara's face. Xander quirked an eyebrow at Spike, who mouthed the name "Angel" at him. Xander flashed his "impressed" face, and earned an eye-roll.

The students all stowed their weapons against a wall and shed their shoes and socks. Xander, Spike, Angel and Buffy did the same. Alan stepped to the front of the room, and the students automatically lined up in front of him in rank order. Xander stepped to his master's left side and gestured for his friends to stay put.

Alan began speaking to the group. "It's good to see everyone. I'm pleased to be able to introduce Sifu Xander Harris of our Atlanta school. He's out here visiting and was kind enough to host our little traveling squad and LA locals on short notice. Many of you already know him. Sifu Xander, I'll let you introduce your friends, and then I'll do the honors for the other students. If you would, tell us a little about the martial arts background of the victims, er – sparring participants." Alan gestured to Xander, who bowed and said "Thank you, Master." He turned and pointed to the spectators. "In the cheap seats, we have the Peanut Gallery. The red haired lady is Ms. Willow Rosenberg, who has the dubious distinction of being my best friend since practically birth. With her is Daniel Osborne, who we call Oz. The little family is Jase, Dawn and Sara Hunter. The lovely brunette on the end is Ms. Cordelia Chase, who had the great misfortune and glaring bad taste to actually date me in high school."

Xander gestured toward the three in workout gear who were standing at his side. "Here we have the victims. In the center, truly a rose among thorns, we have the lovely and talented Ms. Buffy Summers. Buffy is very deceptive – I promise you that she can kick most of your asses; I know she can kick mine. Buffy's been a

martial artist for more than fifteen years and has been tutored in more techniques than I can name." Buffy blushed prettily and smiled.

Xander continued, gesturing at the vampires. "And ... the thorns, the one-named wonders. Tall, dark and broody here is Angel. He studied ass-kicking and brawling at many of the finest pubs across Europe and Asia, and has been fighting, well, pretty much forever. This is his gym and his hotel. Oh, and if you mess up his hair, he may kill you, or at the very least, throw you out." Angel shot Xander a dagger look followed by an evil smile.

Xander gestured at Spike, who was facing the group with his arms crossed over his chest and a challenging look on his face. "This is Spike," Xander said, smiling at his lover, who gave him a sardonic grin in return, waiting to see how Xander would describe him. "Watch out for Spike. He's possibly the most devastating fighter I've ever seen. He's also not overly burdened with a burning desire to follow the rules. Spike's very checkered background includes street fights, bar fights, brawls, mosh pits, riots, small wars and civil insurrections. Mess with him at your own risk." Spike flipped Xander the two-fingered salute.

Alan took up the introductions again. "Thank you Sifu Xander, and thank you Angel, for the use of your facility." Angel and Alan exchanged a short bow. "I think most of you know Sifu Xander, either by experience or by reputation. For those who do not, just let me say that he is one of the finest students I have ever had, and I consider him a friend." Spike saw that Xander was swallowing hard against a lump that had

risen in his throat at the high praise, and pride swelled within him. God, I'm a sap, he thought.

Alan ran down the row of students, naming them. The Asian girl was Naomi, and the others were Bruce, Paul, Donna, James and Kelly. Moe, Larry and Curly turned out to be Jeff, Todd and, ironically, Larry. Once the introductions were complete, Alan spoke a phrase in Chinese. The students all sank to their knees, sitting on their heels and dropping their loosely fisted hands to their knees with their eyes closed. Spike recognized the meditation posture that Xander had assumed at his house that first day. The group sat motionless until Alan spoke another phrase; then they placed their fists next to their thighs and bowed until their foreheads touched the floor, then sat up. They rose in rank order, following Alan and Xander.

Brooks came to the front and began warming the group up, taking them through a series of stretches and calisthenics. Spike found himself very impressed with Xander. He had noticed in the bedroom that his lover was flexible, but seeing the human kick one foot straight up in the air, grab the foot and fall effortlessly into a full split made him realize that he needn't hold back on the "complicated" positions any longer. A small groan slipped out of Spike's mouth when Xander lifted himself slightly off the floor and converted his American split into a Chinese split; he quickly covered with a cough, but not before Xander, Buffy and Angel all shot him a look. He shrugged and grinned in response.

Warm and sweating lightly, everyone donned padded gloves and mouth guards, coming to stand in a loose semi-circle around Alan and Xander, who were

discussing which students should be paired. Angel wound up with Bruce, who was by far the largest student. The two men shook hands, sizing one another up. Buffy was paired with Brooks, and Spike with Naomi. Once all the others were paired up, Alan turned to Xander and indicated that they would be partners.

Naomi and Spike exchanged bows, and then began circling one another, fists up in defensive positions. Spike waited. The petite Asian girl didn't make him wait long. She stepped in and aimed a flurry of punches at him, which he blocked easily. He responded with a punch and sweep combination; she blocked the punch and deftly sidestepped the sweep. They smiled at one another through their mouth guards, and the speed of their circling increased.

Naomi changed directions and bounced into a front kick combination, Spike blocked and returned with a combination of his own; she danced out of reach. The vampire decided to up the ante, and closed the distance between them to hammer at her with a series of short jabs. She blocked him again, and set her foot behind his to dump him on his ass with a shove to the shoulder. He snagged her wrist and pulled her down with him. They grappled, and Spike was impressed with her flexibility as she slithered out of his grasp. Her light body pinned him, and he slapped the floor as a signal for her to let him up; he preferred to fight on his feet. She hopped up and extended a hand. He touched it lightly and sprang to his feet, circling again.

"Xander was right," she said; her slight accent softened the name to "Sander". Spike quirked his scarred eyebrow at her. She grinned. "He was impressed with

your fighting skill. You inspired him to study the martial arts." Spike's surprise showed on his face, "He told you that?" His right cross was deflected, and Naomi used his forward momentum to spin him around. Spike used a back fist to block her follow-up strike and sidestepped, ducking a roundhouse kick. He spun again, grabbed her heel and pulled her off of her feet. She laughed out loud and accepted his hand up. As they turned, they realized that everyone else in the room had stopped sparring to watch Xander and Alan.

Spike felt his mouth drop open, and caught the mouth guard as it tumbled from his slack lips. The two men were almost a blur, spinning, kicking and punching. Despite his height, Alan was aiming kicks at Xander's head and easily reaching the target, only to be deflected away by repeated blocks. Xander was countering with punches and kicks of his own, but neither man was landing many blows. As the students watched, one of Alan's kicks connected to the center of Xander's chest, knocking the taller man flat on his back.

Alan advanced to give him a hand up, but Xander rolled back onto his shoulders and jackknifed his body upright in one smooth motion, grabbing the extended hand and using it to flip his opponent. Alan rolled and swept Xander's feet out from under him, and they fell to the floor, grappling. Spike could see that his lover was trying to exploit his longer limbs, but the master was slippery, repeatedly breaking Xander's holds. Finally, Alan maneuvered into a position that should have been almost impossible for a human, wrapped one leg around Xander's neck and pinned him. Xander slapped the floor, and the combatants stood, panting and

laughing. As they noticed everyone staring, they said simultaneously "What?" Everyone else in the room broke out into applause.

Alan raised a hand to wipe his forehead and gestured to the group. "All right, enough with the ego-stroking. Change partners, bow, spar." The students shuffled themselves into new pairings, and Spike found himself facing Bruce, Angel's previous opponent. The big man was tough, and only Spike's speed saved him a couple of times. In the third round, Spike was paired with Brooks, and found him to be an able fighter. Spike did smack him around a little, all the while telling himself that it had nothing to do with the hug Xander had shared with the man when he'd arrived. Brooks took his shots and landed a few of his own, a large grin never leaving his face.

After one-on-one sparring, they took a short break. Cordelia had set up a table with towels and drinks and was acting as hostess. Both Xander and Alan had been approached by students and were demonstrating particular moves. Spike grabbed a bottle of water and slung a towel around his neck, and then drifted to where Xander was assisting one of the Stooges, who he introduced as Larry.

Spike watched his lover finished helping the student, and then offered him the water as Larry left them to speak to another student. As Xander drank, Spike asked him in a low voice, "Having fun, luv?" Xander's smile was breathtaking, not that Spike needed to breathe. "I'm having a blast," he enthused. "You look like you're holding your own." "Course I am," was Spike's indignant reply. "I can take a bunch of bloody

humans any day." He stepped just a little closer to Xander, allowing their shoulders to barely brush. The contact was electric. "You really looked good out there, Xan. You make me want to hold you down and make you scream." His voice was a low, sensuous rumble, pitched so only the two of them could hear. "I can't wait to get you back upstairs later." Xander's hand came up and brushed against the vampire's arm. He leaned in and whispered, "Sounds good, but right now you have to get away from me so I don't embarrass myself by getting a major hard on in these pants." He snared the towel draped over Spike's shoulder and used it to scrub roughly at his sweaty face and neck, then replaced it and pushed Spike back a step. The vampire yielded and turned to walk away. He hesitated, then took one step backward and turned his head to speak over his shoulder. "Did I mention how much I want you right now?" he asked, then strode quickly away, not looking to see the open, flushed, needy expression on his human's face, though he knew it was there.

Alan called the group to order and explained that the next sessions would be uneven matches, two on one, three on one and four on two configurations. In the first round, Spike found himself defending against Kelly, a tall, thin blonde woman and Jeff, one of the Stooges. He had very little trouble fighting them off and was even able to sneak looks at Xander, who was easily holding off two students. For three on one sparring, Naomi joined Spike's attackers, and he was much busier. He caught a few glimpses of huge Bruce joining Xander's group. For four on two, Spike and Naomi teamed up, as did Xander and Brooks, each team fighting four attackers. Spike found Naomi to be

easy to team with, and had fun fighting beside the petite girl. Alan called time, and the group again broke apart to grab towels or water, or just to rest.

Spike sank down against the wall, panting unnecessarily from the exertion. Naomi slid down on one side of him and Buffy on the other. The three passed a water bottle among themselves. After a moment, Buffy looked at Naomi over Spike's knees. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?" the slayer asked her. "Not at all," Naomi replied. Buffy hesitated. "Did you know Xander's wife?" Naomi nodded sadly, and Spike could see the pain in her black eyes. "Yes," she said. "Shari was my best friend. We went to college together. I was in their wedding." Spike laid a hand on her shoulder, and Buffy gave her a sad smile. "I'm sorry, Naomi – I shouldn't have asked." Naomi smiled. "It's OK. I just ... miss her." They sat quietly for a moment, and then Spike squeezed the shoulder under his hand gently. "Were they happy?" he whispered. Naomi covered his hand with hers and returned the squeeze. "Yes, they really were. They had something very special." She hesitated. "You worried about him, yes, while he was gone?" When they both nodded, she continued. "He was happy – they were happy. He will be happy again; with good friends like you to help him." They shared a smile as Alan called them all to order again.

"I have a special treat for everyone," he announced. "We're going to play a little game I like to call 'bar fight'." The students laughed knowingly. "In honor of our special guests, we're going to let Sifu Xander, Spike, Angel and Buffy be the home team." He gestured at them. "You four are the defenders.

Everyone else, you are the attackers. If your ass hits the floor, you're out, and you have to join the Peanut Gallery. We play to last man standing. Defenders, get ready." Angel and Buffy immediately turned back to back, and Spike and Xander mirrored their stance, forming a tight square with each one defending a side. Alan looked around at the group. "Bruce, Larry, Kelly and Brooks – attack!"

The brawl was on. Angel scored the first direct hit, knocking Bruce backward with a powerful kick. The big man faltered, but did not go down. Xander kept his shoulder pressed to Spike's and parried attacks from both sides. Every thirty seconds, Alan called another name and drew another attacker into the melee, jumping in himself at the last. By the time Alan was in, all three Stooges were out, as well as two other students. That left the odds pretty even at five on four. The battle raged like that for several long minutes, each side gaining and losing the advantage, but no one falling. It was Buffy who turned the tide, sending Bruce out with a roundhouse kick that caused him to go over, taking another student with him. That left Naomi, Brooks and Alan fighting the Sunnydale squad. Dawn and Willow were cheering, "Go, Scoobies!" from the sidelines, and the defeated attackers were cheering for both sides.

Spike finally got his wish of fighting Alan, while Xander and Brooks fought, and Buffy and Angel double-teamed Naomi. They managed to knock her down just as Xander dropped Brooks to the floor. The three turned to assist Spike, but stopped short. Spike and Alan were dancing across the floor, flying through the air in flurries of kicks and punches. They both had huge grins

on their faces, and it was obvious to all of the spectators that the two men were truly fighting to the best of their abilities. After more than five straight minutes of sparring, with neither able to take the advantage, they wound down, stopping as if by mutual consent. As they came to rest, Spike bowed deeply to the master, who returned a bow of the exact same depth, then straightened to clap the vampire on the shoulder. The room erupted in cheers and the two men were swarmed. In the confusion, Xander managed to grasp Spike's arm briefly and smile his approval into dancing blue eyes.

Cordelia walked to Angel's side and spoke to him quietly. The large vampire clapped his hands loudly. Once everyone's attention was on him he announced, "Well, if we're done here, Cordelia and Dawn have set us up some drinks and snacks in the lobby." At a nod from Alan, the sparring participants lined up facing him. He chose to have them bow out with an informal standing bow, and they were soon on their way upstairs, shrugging out of sweaty uniform tops and drying off.

Xander turned to look for Spike, and saw that the blond was talking to Naomi and Bruce in an animated conversation. He took a moment to marvel at his lover. It was hard to believe that this was badass Master Vampire Spike. This man was laughing and joking, and doing that shy-smile-ducking-his-head thing that made Xander crazy every time another student clapped him on the back and complimented him. The Big Bad was practically blushing, and Xander was feeling some answering heat, and not in his face. Xander hung back for a moment to savor the satisfaction he was feeling

at the integration of two groups of his friends. Buffy, Angel and the others were mingling easily; Angel was even smiling and pointing out features of the hotel to interested students. Dawn and Jase were trying to keep an eye on Sara as she was passed happily from person to person. Oz and Willow had been cornered by an LA student who recognized Oz from some club gigs, and Cordelia hadn't left Brooks' side, which seemed OK with him.

Xander felt a hand on his arm and looked down to see Alan standing beside him. The older man leaned against the wall next to his student. "Thanks for having us, Xander – this was great." Xander smiled. "Thanks for coming. I was going into withdrawal – no classes for almost a week." Alan raised an eyebrow, "I think your buddy Spike could be a worthy sparring partner – he'd keep you on your toes." Alan hesitated, and then took a breath. "How long have you been away from them?" Xander wasn't surprised at the perceptive question; Alan had always been able to read situations well. Xander sighed. "Eight years. I was stupid to stay away so long. I had ... issues." Alan laughed, then sobered. "Well, Xan – you know what they say, 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' and all that." Xander pushed off from the wall and they turned to go to the elevator. He shot back over his shoulder, "I thought it was 'out of sight, out of mind'?" Alan gave him a wide-eyed stare. "I find it hard to believe that you could forget these people, even if you tried." They joined the others.

Part Twenty-One

Spike was ready to vibrate right out of his skin with tension. It had been an hour since he'd touched Xander and the craving – the need – to do so was making him

twitch. To add insult to injury, it seemed that everyone else in the hotel was touching his lover. Spike knew he was being irrational and possessive and territorial, but seeing other hands on Xander when his were not allowed was causing him to come unglued.

Angel had kicked Spike sharply under the table at one point, and the sudden jolt of pain made the younger vampire realize that he was growling sub-sonically at Brooks because the black-haired man's hand was resting on his boy's shoulder as he and Xander chatted. Intellectually, Spike knew that Xander's friends were responding to him with affection, and that Xander relished the contact; emotionally, however, he was finding it difficult not to growl. Or switch into game face and kill them all. Whichever. Eventually, Angel resorted to a dirty trick, sending Sara to ask her "Uncle Will" for a bedtime story and tucking-in services. Spike had allowed himself to be led away by the toddler, but not before flashing his grand-sire a killing look.

Three stories, two drinks of water and about a hundred questions later, Spike had returned to the lobby to find that most of the visitors had left. A lively group comprised of Buffy, Angel, Dawn, Cordelia and Brooks was gathered in front of the fireplace. Spike walked over to tell Dawn that Sara was asleep and that Jase was with her. He found himself drawn into their conversation, going over specific moves they'd used in the sparring session and exchanging friendly insults.

Looking around, Spike spotted Xander, Alan and Naomi sitting in a far corner of the lobby, deep in conversation. He desperately wanted to join them, but knew that if he did he would not be able to keep his

hands off of Xander, so he stayed put. Looking more closely, he saw that Xander was twisting the two platinum bands on his ring finger in a gesture he'd not seen the human make in days. Spike knew that they were talking about Shari. He viciously smashed down the urge to run to his lover's side and settled for simply walking across the room, making sure that the others saw him coming.

He stopped at the back of the sofa and placed his hands lightly on Xander's shoulders, leaning in to put his head between his dark head and Naomi's. He deepened his voice for effect and intoned, "I feel a tremor in the Force." In his normal voice he continued, "Come on, Xan – Angel's over there laughing it up and you're over here brooding. That's just unnatural." He was gratified when Xander laughed and stopped twisting the rings.

Alan and Naomi stood and pulled Xander to his feet and helped Spike herd him over to the rest of the group. Over the next hour, they laughed and talked, but Spike could tell that Xander was not fully engaged. Finally, the party wound down. Xander, Willow and Cordelia walked the visitors out, along with Oz, who was going back to his apartment because of an early session the next day. Buffy, Angel and Dawn all retreated upstairs, but Spike stayed in the lobby. After a few moments, Cordelia and Willow returned to the lobby, their heads bent together, whispering, and then bursting into laughter.

"What?" Spike demanded as they approached him. Cordelia laid her hand on his arm and tried to catch her breath. "I was telling Willow that Brooks pulled me

aside and told me to be careful, because he was pretty sure that my boss is a vampire!" She and Willow whooped with laughter at the flummoxed expression on Spike's face. He gathered his wits and asked slowly, "What did you say to that?" Cordelia wiped her streaming eyes and struck a hands-on-the-hips pose.

"I told him that not only is Angel a vampire, you are, too; and that I'm part demon, Willow's a witch, Oz is a werewolf, Buffy's the Slayer and we're not really sure what Dawn is anymore." Spike's lips moved, but no sound came out. On his second try he managed to croak, "How'd he take it?" Cordelia cocked her head to one side. "He seemed OK with it – mostly wanted to make sure that Xander is still human. I told him Xan, Jase and Sara are our token normals." Off his quizzical look, Cordelia gave Spike a tight smile. "I figured, what the hell – love me, love my family; fangs and all." Spike looked at her admiringly, "You're a class act, Cordy." At that, she gave him a real smile, one that slowly faded. She squeezed Spike's arm. "You better go out and get Xander – I feel broody vibes from the parking lot." Both girls kissed Spike on the cheek and departed. As she left, Willow whispered, "he needs you" in the vampire's ear on a warm breath.

Spike stepped out of the front door of the hotel into the covered turnaround area and looked around. Xander was sitting on a decorative half-wall, staring up into the moonlight. Spike was instantly reminded of the heartbreakingly beautiful figure that Xander had cut, standing in the moonlight in tears on the night that he'd first told them about Shari. Tonight there were no tears on the tanned face, and the two men were lovers; not recently reunited acquaintances. Xander

turned his head and noticed the vampire, gesturing him closer.

Spike closed the distance; Xander parted his knees and drew the blond between them. His seat on the wall put their heads at the same height, faces inches apart. Spike raised a hand and carded his fingers through tangled sable waves. Blue and brown eye met and neither man moved for a long time.

When Xander started to stir on the hard bricks, Spike cupped the back of his neck and leaned forward to brush their lips together lightly. Stepping back, the vampire pulled his lover into a standing position and began leading him back to the hotel. They didn't speak as they crossed the lobby or in the elevator, content to merely stand close and lean on one another. Once on the fifth floor, Spike gestured for Xander to wait while he moved down the hall and opened an unmarked door, pulling out several sets of bed liens and a stack of towels, and then led Xander back to their suite.

Xander opened the door, and Spike pushed him toward the bath, admonishing him to get the shower started. Xander complied. As soon as the human was gone, Spike stripped and remade both beds, then gathered up the clean towels and joined his lover. Spike peeled off his clothes and walked into the enormous marble shower. Xander was standing with his back to the door, arms braced on the wall, forehead pillowed on his arms. One leg was slightly bent and his body was wreathed in steam as the water cascaded over his tanned back. Though he made a lovely picture, standing unaware, Spike knew that the pose was one of dejection, not calculated to arouse. Still silent, Spike

pressed his brow to the center of Xander's upper back and let his hands rest lightly on the hips before him. No other parts of their bodies touched, and they again stood motionless for long minutes.

Finally, Spike raised his head and grabbed the shower gel, carefully washing Xander's skin and then his own. The vampire turned his lover to face him and shampooed and rinsed his silky hair. Spike moved the unresisting boy to sit on the shower's bench while he attended to his own hair. Once finished, he pulled Xander back under the spray, where the taller man automatically assumed his previous stance. Spike left the shower, dried off and got dressed in sweat pants and a t-shirt. Back in the bathroom, he called to Xander, "Come on out, luv." He waited, and the water was turned off.

Xander stepped out of the shower and Spike wrapped him in one of the large, fluffy bath towels and dried him carefully. Xander dressed in the sweatpants and t-shirt Spike had brought in for him and smiled absently as he allowed himself to be led to the parlor. The blond vampire sat on the sofa and maneuvered his lover to sit on the floor at his feet so he could towel-dry the dripping dark hair. When Xander's shaggy sable waves were barely damp, Spike finger-combed them into order and tossed the towel away, pressing a kiss to his temple.

"Do you want to talk about it, pet?" he asked softly. Xander took and released a shuddering breath and then another. "It hurts," he said, his pain-filled voice cracking. "It hurts to see all of those people and not see Shari. I – I kept looking for her, expecting her to

be there." The human gave a mirthless laugh. "Hell, when you were fighting with Alan, I actually turned to see if she'd seen some great move you made. Then I remembered." Xander took several more deep breaths. When he spoke again, his voice was thick with unshed tears. "When does it stop hurting so much?" he asked miserably.

Spike gently rubbed the back of Xander's neck in soothing circles. "Hell, Xan, I don't know." He gave a short, bitter laugh. "I'm still hurting for people dead a hundred years." He paused. "You don't ever forget, luv, not if they were important to you. But, after a while, the pain gets ... tempered with all of the good memories, so it's more bittersweet." The vampire leaned forward and wrapped his arm around Xander's neck, resting his chin on the warm shoulder. "You're not wrong to grieve."

Xander scrubbed his face with his hands, and Spike sat back on the sofa, recognizing that the boy still needed to talk. "I feel, I feel so ungrateful," he gritted out. "I came back to Sunnydale, out of the blue. You took me in and made me welcome, and made me feel ... normal – or almost normal – again. You and Dawn and Buffy and Willow – you all forgave me instantly for being a shitty friend for eight years. I get to spend a great evening doing something I love with people who love me, and I turn it into one big pity party." He hung his head. "I'm an ass."

"No, luv – you're just being you. It's your nature to try to carry the weight of the world – you always were a glutton for punishment." Spike leaned forward and rubbed his cheek against Xander's silky hair. "So,

what'll it be?" he asked brightly. "Evening of brooding? We can probably find a chick flick on the telly, bawl into our popcorn." Xander dipped his head to place a kiss on top of the cool hand that rested on his shoulder while he pondered. After a long moment he stood and held out a hand to Spike. "I think I have a better idea." Spike took the hand and was pulled gently into his lover's arms. Warm lips traced the outside edge of a cool ear, and Xander whispered, "Take me to bed, Will. Love me." Spike answered him with a soft kiss and then led him to the bedroom.

An hour later, Xander was sleeping peacefully. Spike was not. He slipped from the bed and pulled on his discarded clothes. He ran a hand through his disheveled hair, scooped up a room key and let himself out of the suite.

Willow answered his knock wearing soft-looking pink pajamas, with a pair of wire-framed glasses perched on her nose. Her hair was held back with a headband, and her face, devoid of makeup, glowed. Spike thought she looked about twelve years old and told her so. "Flattery will get you everywhere," she told him as she ushered him inside. She crossed the room to the desk and busied herself shutting down her laptop computer. Once the computer was taken care of, she crossed back to the vampire, who was standing by the door staring at the carpet, and took his hand to lead him into the bedroom. She pointed to the bed, and they shared a smile as he kicked off his unlaced boots and they both climbed under the covers, arranging the pillows so they were both on their sides, facing each other. Spike slipped a cold foot between her warm ones. They both sighed, relaxing easily into these

positions that they had taken so many times in years past, when everyone else had been too busy with the latest apocalypse and they'd been too damaged to do much else but comfort one another.

"I was wondering when you'd wind up back in my bed, you vampire slut," Willow teased. "I thought you might have forgotten me." Spike smiled, "Wasn't willing to risk the wolf bite, Red." She smiled back. Her green eyes searched his face and saw the strain there. "Xander was sad tonight," she did not phrase it as a question. "Yeah," Spike sighed. "He got hit with some pretty powerful memories, what with the Dirty Dozen here and all." They shared a sad smile. "I liked his friends," Willow confided. "It makes it easier, knowing that he had them while he was away. Except that it also makes me jealous, which isn't very nice at all, and what do you know – I'm babbling." Spike grinned. "It's OK. I like it when you babble. It's cute." She gave him a mock-frown. "More flattery. You must want something big."

Spike turned over on his back. Willow recognized this gesture from the past. Both of them had used this particular dodge when they needed to ask or say something horrible or embarrassing and didn't trust themselves to be able to maintain eye contact. The vampire studied the ceiling and then mumbled a question that Willow didn't catch. "Spike, human ears here. Say again?" she demanded. He sighed, and then spoke clearly. "Why won't Xander fuck me?" Willow's mouth fell open, and she was thankful that he wasn't looking at her as a blush raced from her chest to her hairline. "Wha ...um, I mean ...Spike, I was pretty sure that, uh you two, er ...that your relationship had a, um,

physical component ...” She trailed off, and then also turned on her back to study the ceiling.

“We’ve had sex, Red. What I mean is that I’m always top and he’s always bottom, and when I suggested we switch, he looked bleedin’ horrified.” Spike draped an arm over his eyes. Willow asked softly, “What did you do then?” The vampire sighed, yet again. “What do you think I did? I pretended I never said it, then I distracted him by trying to suck his brains out through his dick, and then I fucked him.” They both paused, and Spike flashed back on the wholly erotic mental picture of Xander’s face when Spike’s cock had eased into his body as they had coupled face-to-face for the first time. Spike knew he was lying when he said that he had fucked Xander. He had made love to the man, and he had seen those brown eyes go wide with some unnamed emotion as their chests and stomachs had sealed together, close, closer, then joined inextricably together. Finally, Willow spoke. “Wow,” she breathed. “That was a short, yet very vivid description.” After a long moment, Spike replied, “I guess it was, wasn’t it?”

They lay quietly on the bed, each lost in thought. After a few minutes, Willow shifted to face the center of the bed and tugged Spike over to face her. “I know the answer,” she said, matter-of-factly. “It’s not you, Spike. It has nothing to do with you.” The vampire looked at her disbelievingly. “I’m a narcissist, pet – it’s always about me,” he deadpanned. She gave him a small smile and tangled their feet once again as she spoke.

“Do you remember what happened when Kennedy and I first got together?” He shrugged, not really sure if he

did or not. He hadn't really liked the dark-haired girl – he'd thought she was kind of a bitch, and she hadn't liked him either. Willow continued, "Well, after she and I kissed for the first time, my mind went all overdrivey and I almost turned into Warren." She shuddered delicately at the memory, and Spike realized he did know the story. "That was a spell," he said. Willow shook her head. "The spell made the punishment manifest, but it was my mind that came up with it. Brains are funny that way, with the torturing and craziness. I wanted to turn into Warren because I felt like I had betrayed Tara by kissing Kennedy."

She ran the back of her hand lightly down the vampire's smooth, cool cheek. "He wasn't horrified at the idea of ...making love to you; he was horrified at the idea of making love to anybody other than Shari. Not to put too fine a point on it, she was the last person he was inside, and it's one of the last things of her that he's got left. When that's gone he's just one step closer to having to accept that the part of his life that had her in it is over." She smiled sadly and saw her gathering tears mirrored in his beautiful blue eyes. "He doesn't have much of her left to cling to – just his revenge against Dru and wearing mourning," she concluded. Spike smiled at her wryly, blinking back the tears. "Noticed that, did you?" She stroked his face again and spoke softly. "I've done this, remember? It does get better. You just have to give him time and support and love, and try to be ready for the days when he stumbles."

Spike leaned into her warm hand and pressed a soft kiss to her palm. His voice was muffled. "I just don't want to screw this up." Willow gathered her friend into

her arms and marveled at the changes the years had wrought in this beautiful, flawed creature. She sometimes thought that the vampire was the most human of all of them. She crooned soothingly and rubbed his back as he relaxed into her embrace. "It'll be fine, Spike. You'll do great. I have faith in you – in both of you. You and Xander will take care of each other."

Spike slipped back into Xander's bed, and the human instinctively curled toward him and pulled the cool body close. Warm lips settled against the back of his neck and arms enfolded him. Spike luxuriated against the solid body sealed against his back and smiled. Give him time, he thought. Oh, well, one of the upsides of immortality – lots of time. Xander's fingers circled lazily on the inside of the vampire's elbow, and Spike slept.

Part Twenty-Two

Xander woke slowly, drifting in and out of consciousness. He didn't want to open his eyes, wanted to stay wrapped in the warm blankets and cool arms and remember the extraordinary feelings from the night before. He let his mind wander over the roller coaster of emotions he'd felt in the past twenty-four hours. It seemed an apt metaphor. In the six months between Shari's death and coming to Sunnydale, he had kept a tight hold, staying numb to avoid the vicious hurt. Since coming to Sunnydale and L.A. he'd gone from breathtaking joy to soul-crushing despair

about a hundred times. The previous night was no exception. After the sparring match was over and all of his friends had gone, Xander's heart had ached for Shari. It seemed so unfair that she was gone. He wondered when his mind would finally assimilate that she was never coming back; it hurt so much to have something happen and automatically think, "Where's Shari? I've got to show her this," and then remember. His heart broke again every time.

He had been outside, staring at the moon and just hurting when Spike had come to him. Somehow the vampire always knew what was needed, offering strength and silence, and just letting Xander be. It was a remarkable thing. He thought about the gentle way he'd been led upstairs and attended to, how Spike had merely taken care of his immediate needs without comment, letting him take the time he needed. Throughout the shower and getting dressed and having his hair dried so carefully, Xander had taken a little vacation from reality. He'd stopped thinking and just allowed himself to be in the moment and feel. Each gentle touch and small kindness had been a balm to his aching heart.

When Spike had finally broken the silence to let him talk, Xander had poured out his hurt. He was thankful that the vampire hadn't given him platitudes, but had told him the truth. Xander knew that he'd never forget Shari and Lex, and that those memories would always be painful, but he believed Spike. He believed that all of the wonderful memories would ease that pain, and that someday he would be able to think about them and have it feel – what was Spike's word? – bittersweet. He could live with bittersweet.

Rolling onto his back and resettling the sleeping vampire onto his chest, Xander smiled at the happy sound that came from Spike's beautiful lips as he settled into the new position. When he'd asked to be taken to bed and loved, Spike had complied without question. From the first sweet kiss to a final sigh, their coming together had been almost perfect. Xander flinched at the thought of what his face must have looked like when Spike had looked up at him and panted, "Xander, baby, want you inside me." The vampire could not have known that he was unconsciously parroting a phrase that Shari had used so many times to signal Xander that she was ready for him. He knew that his face had frozen into a shocked expression, because he saw a flicker of hurt and sadness in the glittering blue eyes under him. Xander had tried to recover as quickly as possible, but, thankfully, Spike had glossed right over it, and had proceeded to make Xander forget all about it, too.

Spike had gently reversed their position, moving on top and had nibbled his way down his lover's body and stroked and teased and licked and sucked at him until Xander had thrashed mindlessly and poured himself into the willing, cool mouth. As soon as Xander caught his breath, Spike was crawling up his body, giving him sweet kisses that were flavored with his own bitter fluids. Xander had pressed the tube of lubricant into the vampire's hand and at Spike's small frown begged, "Please, Will, love me". With another searing kiss, Spike had complied. He had used his fingers to open and prepare Xander for what felt like an hour. Xander knew that he was being careful because of the human's earlier soreness, but by the time he'd finished,

Xander's head was rolling on the pillow, and he was chanting, "love me, love me" mindlessly.

When the cool fingers left his body, Xander started to shift over onto his stomach. A hand on his hip stopped him. "Oh, no you don't," Spike said in a tone filled with laughter. "I saw you tonight - you're flexible enough for face-to-face. Besides, I want to see your eyes, and I want you to see mine." At that, Xander gasped and allowed the blond to arrange him into position, with one knee pulled up to his chest and the other wrapped around Spike's waist. Xander felt the slick head of Spike's cock pressing against his opening, and let out a long groan as he was slowly filled, inch by inch. Brown eyes met glittering blue ones, and Xander hoped that his eyes were showing Spike all the things he couldn't say as the vampire began to make love to him.

It truly had been making love, Xander reflected. All of their previous encounters had been exciting and wonderful, but this was different. Xander knew that he was entering dangerous territory with Spike. Spike, who'd loved one woman for over a hundred years; Spike who made obsessive stalkers seem attention-deficit. Spike, who'd relentlessly pursued Buffy, to the point of attacking and nearly raping her to make her feel again. But, this was not the same man. This was Will - his Will. The one who comforted him and held him and woke him up by tugging on his toes; the one who chewed on the stem of his glasses and tucked his feet under a blanket on the couch. His Will, who dried his hair and held his hand and whose kisses could be blindingly sweet or crushingly erotic, who felt such pain at thinking that he'd hurt Xander, who wanted to protect him whether it was from nightmares or demons

or just from being given a hard time when he was fragile.

This was his Will, his lover, his vampire who was poised above him, around him, inside him. Will's fingers clutching his hair, Will's hard body pressed against his, and Will's cool cock inside him, stretching him, filling him to the point of pain, crashing against the small bundle of nerves that caused him to see stars on every stroke. Will's hoarse voice that said, "Oh, God, Xan – love this ...you feel so good, can't get enough of you, love how you feel," and trailed off to an inarticulate howling sob.

Xander was brought out of his reverie by three simultaneous realizations. He realized that thinking about last night had given him a raging erection, that Spike was awake, and that the vampire had noticed the aforementioned erection and was lightly grinding his hip against it. Xander rolled them over so he was on top. He smiled down into sleepy blue eyes. "Good morning, love," he whispered. "Did you sleep well?" The vampire nodded and stretched his neck to rub his smooth cheek against Xander's stubbled one. Xander held him close, not moving. Even without friction, Spike's cock was starting to harden against his, and he thrust down slightly to feel the delicious tingle as their lengths came into contact.

Exchanging light touches and kisses and whispered words of nonsense, the two men moved together languidly. Their movements were not about seeking release, but about sharing and loving and learning about one another. They found each other's ticklish

spots and the spots that made them gasp and spots that made them move more urgently. Xander spent long minutes exploring the cool column of Spike's pale neck, running his lips and tongue over every inch of its pale beauty. Spike's fingers tangled in his lover's sable hair and traced the contours of his skull, neck and ears with lightly scratching fingernails. They kissed endlessly; hot, slow kisses; light, fast kisses; deep, wet kisses; they lost themselves in the sensations of lips and tongues and teeth. Hands and mouths traced the contours of muscular chests and arms, dipping and sliding over ridges and swells.

Finally, they could stand it no longer. Spike's hands came up to curl around Xander's hard triceps muscles; in turn, Xander clasped the back of the vampire's neck and one hard hip. They pressed their foreheads together and stared into one another's eyes as their lower bodies moved, faster now, sliding, hot flesh on cool, crisp hair against smooth velvet-over-steel skin. The human found his release first, and the splash of hot semen between them sent Spike over the edge, too. Their motions slowed; both enjoying the slick slide against super-sensitive flesh. They stilled and held there, until Xander's breathing returned to normal and Spike's stopped. They rolled to one side, eyes and bodies still locked together, each unable to break either the gaze or the silence that hung between them; unwilling to interrupt the moment or to admit that something new was happening between them.

Xander leaned forward and kissed Spike deeply. "Thank you," he whispered against cool lips. The vampire simply kissed him back and repeated the phrase.

Dressed casually, Spike and Xander walked into the kitchen, hand in hand. Cordelia was standing in front of the open refrigerator, drinking a diet soda and starrng moodily at the food. When she noticed the men, she gave them a smile. "You guys want lunch?" she asked. Xander answered affirmatively. "Good," she exclaimed. "While you're at it will you make something for me and Willow?" She gave them a mischievous smile. They laughed together, and Spike offered to make lunch. He started pulling ingredients out of the refrigerator, tossing a bag of blood to his lover, who placed it in the microwave to heat. "I'm afraid it's grilled cheese," the vampire grouched. "Don't you people keep any food around here?" Cordelia let out an exaggerated sigh. "We eat out a lot. Nobody here can really cook." Spike laughed at her sad face, and promised to cook her a real dinner. Cordelia brightened at the offer. Taking Xander by the hand, she led him through a door that led out of the kitchen, promising Spike that she would keep him occupied while the Master Vampire Chef was at work.

The door led to a suite of offices. It was nicely decorated and had all of the modern conveniences. Willow sat at the reception desk and frowned at the computer, typing away busily. She looked up when Xander pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Hey, Xander – how are you doing today?" He perched on the corner of the desk and smiled at her. "I'm good." They chatted for a few minutes until Cordelia called to them. Following her voice, they found themselves in a dark, richly appointed office. From the abundance of leather-bound books, leather furniture, leather desk accessories and Irish whiskey, Xander determined that it belonged to Angel. The huge leather chair pulled up

to an elaborately carved desk dwarfed Cordelia. She was pointing at the monitor before her.

"Check this out." She motioned for the others to look over her shoulder. "This is a website for vampire groupies. It talks about whatever famous vamps are in the area and stuff like that." Xander looked at the screen. "Did you do a search on Angel?" he asked. "Not yet, but I will." They shared a grin. "I did a search on Drusilla, though – look at this."

Xander leaned in to read aloud the information that was printed beneath a drawing of Drusilla. "Drusilla always seems to come back to Los Angeles. There are suspicions that her sire still lives in the city. Also of interest may be her wayward childe, Spike." Spike's name was underlined, showing that it was a link. Cordelia clicked on it and a new page opened. Xander was greeted with a large, color photo of himself and Spike, taken at the dance club. In it, Spike was sprawled on the club's stairs, legs spread in a wanton pose. Xander was behind him, sitting with his arms wrapped around Spike's chest and his face buried in his lover's neck.

Cordelia read the text this time. "Master Spike, late of Sunnydale, has kept a low profile for a number of years. Seems like that profile has risen considerably, as he was spotted in a mixed group of demons and humans at Club 668 over the weekend. No one was naming names, but speculation is that one of his companions was the Slayer. Also no word on the brunet in the above photo ... new Consort? Inquiring minds want to know..." Cordelia sat back in her chair and looked at Willow and Xander. "Terrible writing, but

the photo is hot," she commented. Xander pointed at the screen. "Save that for me, would you?" She complied. After a pause, Xander cleared his throat. "I don't know what this means, exactly, but I'm hungry. Let's move this discussion to the kitchen." The girls agreed.

Back in the kitchen, Buffy, Angel, Dawn, Jase and Sara had gathered. Buffy was setting the table as Spike finished cooking. Xander and the two girls joined them, pulling up chairs. Over lunch they discussed the website. Spike, Dawn and Buffy wanted to see the picture; Angel brooded. None of them really knew what it could mean. Cordelia announced that if there was one vampire groupie website, there would be a hundred more, and that she and Willow would follow up on as many as they could. Jase offered to join the effort on his laptop, as did Xander and Dawn. Angel, Buffy and Spike decided that they would use the vast network of sewer tunnels to do some old-fashioned legwork in the demon bars and hangouts.

Throughout lunch, Xander and Spike held hands, shared lingering looks and generally acted like swanning newlyweds. Cordelia, Willow, Buffy and Dawn exchanged glances and covered broad smiles with their hands, happy to see their friends so besotted with one another. When it came time for the two groups to split up, Buffy and Angel practically had to pry Spike from Xander's side. Finally, with a lingering kiss, the two men parted, each led away by their assigned group.

Xander went upstairs with Willow to retrieve both of their laptops, so Jase and Dawn could have Angel's computer. In the elevator, the redhead sighed and

looked closely at her oldest friend. "You and Spike seem pretty close this morning," she observed. His smile was blinding as he replied, "Yeah, I've gotta say things are going well, despite all the impending revenge and murder parts." She smiled, "Don't worry, we'd never let that stuff get in the way." They shared a smile. Hers turned wistful. "You seemed pretty upset last night. Grief thing?" Remembering that she was the one person who could actually understand his feelings, Xander clasped her hand and nodded. "Wills, does it get any easier?"

"Not anytime soon," she replied. "I won't lie to you. It sneaks in from time to time and sort of jerks the rug out from under you." He squeezed her hand. "Even now? After so long?" His voice was soft. She squeezed back. "Yep, even now. I still remember every word she said to me that day; I can still see her face as she said them. I swear that sometimes I feel her, or smell her." The door opened and they walked down the hall to Willow's door in silence. Xander waited as she gathered her things, and they turned to go back down the hall. She hesitated, and then laid her hand on his arm. "Xander, I know I'm not exactly the poster child for emotional availability or moving on, but I have to say something. Don't push Spike away. I think he needs you as much as you need him."

Xander placed his hand over hers. "I think you're right, Wills. I won't push him away. You can count on it." They continued to the elevator and boarded it to go to Xander's room for his computer. They exited on the fifth floor and walked to 501. Xander let Willow in and went to the closet to retrieve his laptop bag. Willow had seated herself on the sofa, and she motioned for

him to join her. Xander settled himself beside her and took her hand.

"You look serious, Wills," he observed. She smiled, but her eyes were worried. "Xander, I want to tell you something," she looked down at their clasped hands, then back up to his face, stalling. He gave her a gentle smile and waited. She began to speak haltingly. "I ... I don't want you to do what I did. I don't want you to make the mistakes I made... when Tara died." Xander smiled at her. "No offense, but I'm pretty unlikely to go all dark and veiny and try to destroy the world." She punched him lightly on the shoulder. "I don't mean that. I mean after the after, Doofus. I was so afraid to be hurt again that I didn't let anyone get really close, not Kennedy, not Oz, not anybody." She looked down at their hands again and whispered, "I still haven't." Xander wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. He lowered his lips to her ear and whispered, "It's not too late, Willow. Oz has waited for you all this time. He loves you." She squeezed him back and he pressed a kiss to her temple.

They separated, and she looked at him with eyes bright with unshed tears. Willow looked into Xander's brown eyes and decided that she would take a chance and say the rest of what she was thinking, come what may. She drew in a deep breath and spoke. "Xander, you do know that being with Spike doesn't take anything away from what you had with Shari, don't you? What you and she had stays frozen in time – it will always be there for you when you need it." She paused, and he looked at her. Comprehension dawned in his eyes, and he smiled and blushed at the same time. "That's where he went last night!" he exclaimed. "Oh, God. He told

you He told you ... Willow, what did he tell you?" Her face flushed, and he groaned out loud. "Do I really want to know what he told you?" he asked. "Let's just say he needed a little insight into grief and what it does to you and leave it at that, OK?" she begged. Xander decided to let her (and himself) off the hook. He paused, and then said, "Thank you, Willow. Thanks for helping him understand. It means a lot to me."

They left the suite and headed back downstairs. Dawn and Jase worked in Angel's office, Cordelia manned her desk, and Xander and Willow shared a large table in the conference room. Sara happily toddled between all of the adults, finally winding up asleep in one of the conference room chairs as the afternoon wore on. The pile of pages on the printer grew as the searchers cataloged any mention of Drusilla, Spike or Angel that they found.

Spike was happy. He held the scaly, blue-green demon still so that Buffy could deliver a smash kick to its knee. She danced back five feet, and the vampire slung the demon after her. Buffy caught its not-inconsiderable bulk easily and wrenched it around to allow Spike to pummel it with a blindingly fast series of jabs to its body and head. He stepped back, and the Slayer shoved the demon toward her mate. Angel clotheslined his adversary with one arm, causing it to slam down onto the ground with a muttered curse. He picked it back up and spun it around as Buffy and Spike moved in to each smash a knee into its midsection.

The unfortunate creature went around the circle two more times before Angel allowed it to fall, semi-conscious against the wall. Buffy panted and wiped her

hands on her jacket. Giving a chortling Spike an arch look, she asked, "What's so funny, Bleachy?" He raised an eyebrow at her. "That's sorta the pot calling the kettle blonde, innit Miss Clair?" He gestured to the unmoving demon. "I was just thinking that our friend here didn't enjoy our little game of demented Red Rover." Buffy raised a hand to her hair and frowned, then relented and laughed. Angel joined in as the demon started to stir on the floor.

Spike rubbed his hands together gleefully. Kicking the crap out of this demon was great fun, and he was enjoying the fact that he wasn't getting any obnoxious guilty feelings from doing it. The big blue asshole had info about Dru that he was reluctant to share. Spike needed the info to help Xander; therefore, no big heavy guilt trip, just ass-kicking. He walked over to the demon and crouched down in front of it. He poked it in the chest to punctuate his words. "Now, let's hear what you know about Drusilla. Remember her? Tall, dark, thin and loony as a treebird?" Spike was dearly hoping that the demon would resist so they could play with it some more. To his great disappointment, it muttered a few phrases in its native language. Buffy and Angel looked to Spike expectantly for the translation. He waved them off and spoke a short phrase back to the demon in the language that Buffy thought sounded like a cat with a hairball problem. The demon answered with a longer hacking-coughing-barfing series of noises. Spike stood and gestured for the others to follow.

They stalked out the alley door of the small bookshop and returned to the sewer tunnels without encountering any deadly sunlight. Once in the

darkness, Spike leaned against the wall and wished for a cigarette. "OK" he sighed, "Same as the last one. She was here over the weekend; she talked to a number of demons, all of which think she was just babbling daftly at them. Which probably means she did one of her mind-fucks on them. Last guy there, his species isn't all that susceptible to hypnosis, but all he's saying is that she was asking about us." Buffy asked, "How did he know she was asking about us? Did she ask for us by name?" Spike smiled at her. "Specifically, she asked about two vampires who 'stink of souls and Slayer'. I think that was us." Spike and Angel shared a grimace at the description, and Buffy tried to discreetly sniff herself.

Angel pushed off from his leaning position at the wall and straightened his long leather coat. "Well," he said, "Do you want to go beat up some more demons for fun, or just go home and see what the Technology Club has come up with?" Spike and Buffy carefully weighed the options, and then looked at each other and both shook their heads. "Not much more to be gained from the beating," the Slayer said, "however much fun it is. Besides, my hand hurts, and I've got demon blood on my pants." Spike shoved his hands in the pockets of his duster. "Home, then." The three turned and made their way back through the dark.

The sun was almost down by the time they entered the office. Cordelia looked up with a bright smile of welcome, which immediately dropped off her face when she saw that they were not paying customers. "Any luck?" she asked, turning back to her monitor. Buffy wagged her hand in a "so-so" gesture. "You?" she asked. "We found some stuff – don't know how useful it

will be. Why don't you guys go get drinks for everyone and we can sit down in the conference room and compare notes?" Buffy and Angel nodded and turned toward the door to the kitchen. Spike sniffed the air and followed Xander's scent to the conference room.

He had to laugh as he entered the room. Xander was perched on the edge of a large leather chair trying to read what was on his laptop screen while dangling a happy Sara from his foot and bouncing his knee to give her a "horsy ride". Every time he stopped to scroll the page or make an adjustment, she smacked him on the knee and said "Giddyap!" Seeing Spike in the doorway, she shouted, "Whoa, horsey!" and ran to her beloved Uncle Will. The vampire scooped her up and accepted Xander's silent look of thanks, walking over behind him to claim a chaste kiss, ruffling Willow's hair as he crossed behind her chair.

"We're all meeting in here in a few minutes," Spike told the others. "Want to get Jase and the Bit?" Willow nodded and punched a few buttons on the large phone in the center of the table. When Dawn answered, she told the younger woman to gather her husband and all the printouts and come to the conference room. Dawn and Jase arrived at the same time as Angel, Buffy and Cordelia. Everyone settled around the table and drinks were handed around.

Buffy filled everyone in on their not-very-productive experiences, and Cordelia distributed pages printed from the various websites. She launched into a synopsis of their findings. "OK, there seem to be three types of these 'vamp groupie' websites. There are gossip/ news ones that have sightings, histories, that

sort of thing. Most of those knew about you guys being at 668 on Saturday, a couple had pictures. A few of them mentioned Dru, but it was always that she was seen briefly in some vamp hangout or other." She paused and threw a page onto the table. It was a photograph of Drusilla standing in a doorway. The camera had caught her profile, and she had an evil smirk on her face.

Xander reached out and pulled the paper toward him. He traced a finger down the line of her profile, but did not comment. He felt the reassuring weight of Spike's hand on his shoulder and dipped his head to rest his cheek against it for a moment. Cordelia resumed speaking. "The second kind of site was more trashy, supermarket-tabloid kind of stuff. They had a lot of wild speculation and some stuff I think they just made up. Those were the ones most likely to mention the agency by name, though, so hey – free advertising. You guys can read this stuff at your leisure, but the best lie I found was that I'm carrying Angel's love child and that Buffy has turned to seeking the comfort of Ignath demons to cope with her heartbreak over it." Amid laughter, Buffy squeaked indignantly, "Hey! Ignath demons are nasty – they have that mucous."

Cordelia shook her head. "The third type of site was just plain disturbing. They had tributes to specific vampires, with all these weird manipulated photos and they even had fiction stories written about different vamps, er, doing stuff with other vamps and non-vamps and well, everybody. Um, Spike – you're very popular on those. I think you may have a cult." Spike looked interested at that tidbit. "And I'm hoping that some of the pictures I saw are fakes. Just out of

curiosity, are there really photos in existence of you wearing nothing but handcuffs and leather chaps?" Spike met her eyes and smiled broadly. "Photos? Hmmm, not that I remember, but" He trailed off and everyone laughed. Xander shot him a questioning look and gave his lover an exaggerated pout when the vampire shook his head.

They all sat quietly for a moment. "So, we've got nothing, right?" Xander asked. "We know she's around, but that's not getting us any closer." Spike rubbed his arm reassuringly. "Pet, I don't think finding her is going to be a problem. If she's here, then she's planning something. I have a feeling she'll find us. We just have to make sure we're ready." There were grim nods all around the table. Sighing, Xander stood and stretched. "Is it dinner time yet?" he asked plaintively. Spike reached out to rub the human's flat belly, and then hoisted Sara higher on his shoulder. "Let's see what we can come up with," he suggested as he led the group back to the kitchen.

Part Twenty-Three

Cordelia sighed as she slammed the door of the dishwasher and started the machine. She had the good grace to laugh at herself. I'm as bad as Angel, she thought, brooding in the kitchen because everyone else has somebody to snuggle up to. She had kicked the couples out of the kitchen shortly after everyone had finished the spaghetti dinner that Spike, Xander and

Willow had concocted out of the pantry and cupboards that Xander had pronounced “positively Mother Hubbard-y”.

The ex-cheerleader let her thoughts center on Xander. He had turned out to be a striking man. Who knew? He’d always been cute, making the jump into good-looking in the years after high school. But, now? His leaner, sculpted face and body combined with the graceful way he moved and his obvious quiet confidence were like a beacon. All of the women in the hotel were keeping a surreptitious eye on him, staying under Spike’s radar to avoid being growled at while still enjoying the eye candy. Cordelia shook her head at the thought of the strange couple. Spike and Xander had worked as a team cooking dinner, interacting like an old married couple, complete with good-natured bickering and stolen kisses. Willow had danced around and between the two men, her joy at being with both of them obvious.

Dinner had been a leisurely affair, with discussion and speculation about the meaning of the meager information they had gathered. After hashing over the few facts, it had degenerated into laughing and one-upmanship, as they had combed the printouts for outrageous rumors and teased each other mercilessly. Finally, Willow had left to go see Oz’s band perform at a nearby club. Jase and Dawn had carried a cranky Sara to bed, and Cordelia had shooed the vampires and their significant others out of the kitchen so she could clear the table and indulge in a little self-pity.

She had just settled with a cup of coffee when the phone rang. “Chanticleer, this is Cordelia,” she chirped

into the handset. After a short pause, she heard an unfamiliar voice. "Hey, Cordelia – it's Brooks." He was obviously on a mobile phone. "Hi." She waited. After a swish of static, he spoke. "I was at a location shoot kind of near the hotel, and I wondered if you'd like to go for coffee or something? I know it's short notice ..."

His voice trailed off. Cordelia smiled. Things were looking up. "Yes," she said simply. "Yes, coffee or yes, short notice?" he asked. "Both," she replied. With a wry tone he said, "Cryptic much?" Cordelia laughed. "Sometimes. I just made coffee here. Come to the front and I'll meet you, OK?" He agreed, and she hopped up to hang up the phone and peer into the toaster to make sure her hair was all right and there was no salad in her teeth.

Dawn curled her fingers around Sara's chubby ankles and brought the bottoms of her daughter's feet to rest against her face. Sara had fussed a bit after dinner, and then fallen fast asleep. Knowing that the familiar caress was unlikely to wake the baby, Dawn luxuriated in the feel of her child's smooth skin. When, shortly after their wedding, Jase had asked about children, Dawn had tearfully confessed that she had no idea if she was even capable of reproduction, given her otherworldly origins. Jase had hugged her tightly and reassured her.

According to both her doctor and Spike's sensitive nose, Dawn was 100% human. Still, it had taken her a couple of years to conceive. After months of negative tests, Dawn had been so excited to finally get a positive one she had peed on twenty little sticks before Jase had finally forced her to believe the results. The

pregnancy had been uneventful, aside from some truly evil mood swings, and the day of Sara's birth had been crazy, beginning with her water breaking all over Spike's couch halfway through "Passions" and ending with tiny Sara making her squalling debut to a room filled with one husband, one sister, two vampires, a half-demon ex-cheerleader and assorted medical professionals.

Jase slid onto the bed next to his wife and daughter. He gently took one of Sara's feet and kissed the sole. The baby twitched, and they both hastily let go of her, not wanting her to wake. A soft sound accompanied her descent back into slumber. Jase pulled Dawn to him, spooning her back against his front and wrapping her in his long arms. Her head rolled back onto his shoulder. "Have I said thank you lately?" she asked. He ran his lips over the curve of her ear and whispered, "For what?" Dawn shifted her brown hair out of the way and bared her neck to give questing lips better access. "For Sara. For you. For this." He smiled against her neck. "You're welcome. Wanna make her a sibling?" His whisper was low, seductive. She turned in his arms to gaze up into sparkling blue eyes. "Really?" He looked back at her steadily. "Really," he whispered, just before their lips met.

Stroke.

Stroke.

Dab.

A finger slid down the arch of her foot.

Stroke.

Stroke.
Dab.

A gentle kiss brushed the end of a toe.

Stroke.
Stroke.
Dab.

The tickle of his tongue caused her to draw back,
stopped by a stern look.

Stroke.
Stroke.
Dab.
Dab.
Dab.
Stroke.

Angel leaned back against his end of the Jacuzzi tub and closed the bottle tightly. He admired the fresh coat of Orbit Coral nail lacquer on the toenails of Buffy's left foot, which rested flat on his chest. She giggled as he blew lightly across the shiny polish.

"Orion's Belt. It holds up Orion's Pants." Xander pointed out the three bright stars. "Ursa Minor, the little bear. The Big Dipper, which is big, and dips." He pointed out two more constellations. Spike's hand flicked lazily across his field of vision, gesturing toward a formation of blinking lights. "LAX," he noted in a smug voice. Xander grabbed the slender, pale hand and kissed it. "Very astute, Carl Sagan," he remarked, then turned the hand over to press a warm kiss into

the palm, folding cool fingers over it.

The lovers were lying side by side on the roof of the hotel, sprawled out on a blanket, enjoying the warm California night. Xander reveled in the ordinariness of it all. Contentment, rightness and belonging washed over him and soothed any residual stress or irritation from the day's mostly fruitless research. He raised the clasped hands from his chest and held them under his nose, breathing in Spike's unique scent, flavored with the dried herbs the vampire had added to the pasta sauce for dinner. "Mmmmmm," he muttered. "Smoke and rain. And oregano." Spike laughed and pulled his hand away so he could roll up onto his side. He looked down into his lover's eyes. "What's that, pet?" he asked.

Xander crossed his hands behind his head and continued looking up, first at the stars, then into beautiful blue eyes, then back to the heavens. "That's what you smell like; smoke and rain. The oregano's from dinner." Spike leaned in and inhaled. It wasn't really necessary; he'd been drowning in the other man's scent since the minute he'd dragged him across the threshold of the house in Sunnydale. However, an excuse to bury his nose in Xander's warm neck was not to be passed up. "You're cinnamon and sunshine," he said. Xander made a happy noise. Spike laughed. "You're an odd duck, Xan. You notice things that most humans don't, like scent." Xander nodded. "Well," he said, "For me, scent is a big trigger. It's true for everybody if you think about it. Everybody reacts to fresh baked bread or their Grandmother's perfume. I notice everyone's scents." He paused, thinking. "It must be really intense for you, with the super nose."

Spike nodded. "Scent can tell you a lot. I can smell emotions and sickness – where you've been and what you've touched. It's handy." He paused. "Everyone has their own underlying smell – unique to only them." Xander pondered for a moment. "OK, then, what is Willow's scent?"

"That's easy – she's mostly rosemary, with a hint of something dark and heady." Spike frowned. "It's like the forest, down by the roots of the trees," Xander supplied. Spike smiled. "You're right, that's exactly what it is – it's old and deep and strong." Xander smiled, "I always thought of it as the smell of her power. It's fainter now." They lay in silence for a few moments, and then Spike said, "How about Cordelia?" They spoke together. "Roses." Spike added, "Probably the most expensive kind." They laughed. Xander said, "Sara." "Easy, mate, she's baby powder and a dirty nappy." Xander chuckled. "She just smells like a baby to me – they all have that ... baby smell. It's nice."

It was Spike's turn. "Buffy." Xander thought about it. "She smells like vanilla and something else, something kind of sharp." Spike told him, "It's sandalwood." Xander said, "Oz." Spike smiled. "He's different – I just smell the wolf on him, and that hippy stuff – patchouli. Smells kind of like feet." Xander poked him in the side. "I'm so telling Oz you think he smells like feet. Your turn." After a few minutes, Spike said, "Joyce." They shared a sad smile for the woman they had both cared about, Xander as a surrogate mother and Spike as a friend. "Joyce is also vanilla, but with cloves and ginger – spicy," Xander decided. Spike agreed. "What about Angel?" Xander asked. "I've never really gotten close enough to smell him." Spike paused and thought about

his grand-sire. His voice was slightly husky when he answered. "He's Irish whiskey and blood to me." Xander decided to lighten the moment. "I was sure you'd say hair gel and angst," he snorted. "That, too," Spike retorted. They laughed together and both relaxed onto their backs again.

"Hey, Spike?" Xander began. "Yes, luv?" Xander paused. "The other night, in the elevator, when you kissed Angel..." Spike interrupted with, "He kissed me, pet." "Whatever," Xander rejoined. "When you guys kissed, I licked some blood off his chin." "Yeah, I saw that." The huskiness was back in Spike's voice. "I ... shared it with Buffy ... when I kissed her." Xander continued, looking steadfastly at the stars. "Saw that, too," Spike said. "Was it yours or Angel's?" Xander's fingers brushed against a cool arm. Spike leaned into the touch. "Uh, both, pet." Xander's voice was also getting husky. "It tasted different than yours and mine did later that night."

"His is ... older, stronger." Spike let his fingers rest against Xander's warm hip. "HMMMM." Xander shifted toward Spike almost imperceptibly. "And I kissed Buffy, to let her taste it." He paused. "That was the second time. The first time I kissed her because I wondered what it would be like." Spike narrowed his eyes, but kept his voice even. "And what was it like?" He watched as Xander's tongue stole out to moisten his lips, as if tasting the kiss again. "I was excited, because I'd always wanted to, but after I did, it seemed ... unimportant. Kissing you is so much better." Spike didn't reply, but he let his body relax. He stiffened up again at Xander's next question. "When Angel kissed you ... does he do that a lot?" Spike

barked a short, hard laugh. "No, pet. That's the first time he's kissed me in over a hundred years."

Silence descended on them again. Xander took a deep breath. Spike knew another question was coming, but he decided that he liked talking to this man, even if the questions were a bit odd. "In the elevator, before we got out. You and Angel had a look thing going on, and you shook your head and we got out. What were you turning down?" Spike remained quiet for a moment, trying to decide how honestly to answer this latest query. Fuck it, he thought and just told the truth. "Vampire, slayer and human group grope, luv." He smiled when Xander's reply was a disinterested, "Huh. That's what I thought. Maybe some other time." The human laughed out loud when the grinning vampire rolled on top of him.

"God, I love the way your mind works." Spike said, smiling madly down into snapping brown eyes. Xander feigned offense. "Hey, I'm not just a brain, you know – I have a hell of a body, too!" Spike answered him by kissing him with unhurried thoroughness, breaking away only when he heard Xander gasping for air. "Yes, luv – you have a gorgeous body and a wonderful mind, and a fantastic sense of smell and terrific taste in men," Spike assured the panting human, who smiled at him. They lay there for long moments, simply looking at one another and smiling, exchanging soft touches.

Eventually, Xander noticed that something not so soft was touching his hip, and he pressed back against it with his own hardness. He thrust his hips up into Spike's and was fascinated that he could actually see lust and heat bloom in the crystal blue eyes. He thrust

harder, and watched Spike's eyes start to cloud. Cool, he thought, I can't believe that I can do this to him. He repeated the motion, and a moan was torn from the vampire's lips. Spike lay perfectly still to let Xander do whatever he wanted. Xander's hands came up and pressed flat against the sides of Spike's head. He tilted his lover's face, first to one side, and then the other, studying the play of moonlight across sharp cheekbones and sculpted lips. He traced the contours with the pads of his thumbs; callused flesh brushing smooth skin in delicious contrast.

Xander slid his fingers through Spike's hair and cupped the back of his head to bring their lips together, starting with feathery brushing motions and tantalizing little licks along the contours of the vampire's mouth. The warm tongue became more insistent, sliding into the cool mouth a little at a time, curling around Spike's and encouraging it to join in the fun. As the kiss deepened, Spike was careful not to become dominant, wanting to let Xander explore at his own pace, determined to play passive as long as he could.

Xander's hips mirrored the motion of his tongue, and their cocks brushed together maddeningly, through layers of denim and cotton. Spike's hands came to rest on Xander's arms, clutching at his broad biceps. Xander's fingers dropped from Spike's head to his chest, starting to unbutton his shirt with slow, precise motions. As each bit of pale flesh was uncovered, hot fingers danced across it, painting over the dips and swells, stopping to rub responsive tissue into hardness, earning stifled groans. Slipping the last button through its hole, Xander peeled the shirt away from Spike's shoulders and took it off, carelessly tossing it aside. He

kissed the vampire lightly and placed his hands flat on the pale chest and pushed until Spike took his own weight on his hands, which were braced on either side of Xander's arms.

Their hips were still cradled together, but the length of Spike's arms separated their upper bodies. Xander brought his hands between them and ran his fingers slowly over the contours of taut muscles that were beautifully flexed and defined. Spike tipped his head back and lost himself in the sensation. Xander's fingers were hot, blazing fiery trails over his skin everywhere they touched. One hand traced a long line from his wrist to his elbow, stopping to scratch circles on the sensitive inner fold before continuing up over the bulge of his bicep. It stroked across his shoulder, and then slipped into the hollow over his collarbone. The other hand rested flat against his ribcage, the fingers lightly massaging his back, the thumb teasing the hollow between two ribs. Spike groaned when soft, wet lips replaced the fingers on his collarbone, and Xander sucked hard against the skin there. He threw his head back even further and turned it to the side, opening himself up to his lover submissively.

Xander took the invitation, moving his mouth to Spike's long, pale neck, kissing up its length, drawing intricate patterns with the tip of his tongue. Finding the spot he wanted, just over the jugular, he bit down softly. Spike hissed in pleasure and arched his back, pressing his groin against Xander, who was momentarily shocked to realize that he could feel the vampire's cock twitch against him through both pairs of their jeans. Xander released the flesh from his teeth and licked the slight mark he'd left. Spike shuddered and relaxed against

him, still bearing the brunt of his weight on his arms. As soon as he felt the vampire sag against him, Xander bit the same spot again, harder this time, skirting the edge of the amount of force it would take to break the skin. Spike howled, pressing himself fully against his lover. Again Xander released him and looked at the mark; it was an angry red, and he could see the small indentation left by each of his teeth.

He raised his eyes to look at Spike's face. He stared up into the yellow eyes of the demon. Xander raised a hand to trace the ridges that decorated Spike's game face, drawing his fingers down them slowly. The vampire's eyes rolled back at the caress. Tentatively, Xander traced Spike's lips, stopping at one fang to lightly run his finger over it. Spike's tongue flicked out to lick at his finger. Bolder now, Xander ran his fingernail down the smooth surface of the fang, and Spike groaned. The questing finger moved to the other fang and gave it the same treatment. As Xander's eyes flicked down to the mark on the vampire's neck, Spike finally spoke. "Finish it," he hissed. Xander knew what he was asking for. He took a deep breath, then grabbed the neck of his own t-shirt and ripped it down the front. "Together," he said, then bent his head to Spike's neck and bit down as hard as he could.

Just as he felt the cool flesh part under his teeth, Xander felt Spike rear back slightly and then plunge his fangs into the spot where the human's shoulder and neck met. Sensations poured over him. He felt the shock of the vampire's skin parting, which was immediately washed away by the taste and feel of blood in his mouth. Unthinking, he drew and swallowed a mouthful, tasting copper and electricity. Xander could

smell the blood, sharp and sweet, familiar and ancient. He could feel the exquisite pain of Spike's fangs in his shoulder, his head spun from the sensation as his blood was pulled into the vampire's mouth. At the same time, his cock was throbbing, sending him into the longest and most intense orgasm of his life.

At the whispered word "together", Spike had pulled back, not daring to believe the offer being made. As soon as the human's blunt teeth had broken his skin, the demon had taken over. Exercising a small amount of control, Spike had managed to not tear his lover's throat out, and had even been able to keep himself to a spot that they'd have a chance of hiding later. The pain of the teeth in his own throat, combined with the taste of Xander's blood sent him over the edge, into the orgasm that had been building, and he came hard, snuffling and groaning around the mouthful of flesh. Xander's taste and scent surrounded him and he sucked it into his mouth, wanting Xander around him and inside him. After one last mouthful, he reluctantly pulled himself away, retracting his fangs and licking tenderly at the wound until it closed; he then buried his face in the crook of his lover's neck.

They held each other tightly, bodies fully pressed together until they stopped panting. Xander's hands began circling on Spike's bare back, tracing soothing patterns there. The vampire levered himself back up onto his hands and started down into languid brown eyes. They shared a slow smile. Warm fingers came up to caress Spike's face, back to normal now. Leaning into the contact, the vampire smiled again. "That was ...," he started, and trailed off. "Yes, it was." Xander rejoined, also smiling. They shared a soft, lingering

kiss. Xander's fingers came up to trace the wound on his shoulder. "Will this scar, like Buffy's?" he asked. Spike gave him a small smile. "No, pet. It should heal fine. Between my spit and the blood you took, it'll be gone in a couple of days. Besides, Buffy's isn't just a bite scar – it's a claim mark. It was meant to scar."

Xander rubbed the bite mark and frowned a little, and then shifted his hips, grimacing at the feel of drying stickiness. "We need a shower," he said. Spike nodded his agreement and gracefully got to his feet. Reaching down, he pulled his lover up beside him and kissed him lightly on the lips. Xander bent back down to grab the blanket and Spike's discarded shirt, and the two men each wrapped an arm around the other and walked slowly to the stairs.

Cordelia was waiting. She was patiently waiting for Brooks to move his hand two inches to the left and take her hand. They were sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee. Before he arrived, she had turned off the harsh overhead lights and lit an oil lamp on the table. It threw a small circle of soft light and cast the rest of the room into shadow. Over the course of their conversation, she and the dark-haired man had each taken a couple of opportunities to move their chairs closer together so that their knees almost touched. Cordelia was starting to get frustrated. My God, she thought, this is Los Angeles. I usually have to use all of my skills to get men in this town to stop touching me, not to start.

Brooks moved his hand one inch to the left. Cordelia smiled at him and ground her molars at the same time.

They had talked about his job and her job and the sparring match and the weather and the entertainment industry and a million trivial things. Pretty much everything except vampires, Slayers, werewolves, witches and half-demon aspiring actresses. Brooks lifted his hand and placed it on top of Cordelia's, curling his warm fingers over to touch her palm. She looked down at their clasped hands and inwardly yelled, "Score!" Their hands clutched together tightly as they heard something heavy hit the door that led into the hotel lobby.

The door flew open, and two bodies stumbled through. The taller figure grabbed the shorter one by the shoulders and pinned him against the wall just inside the door. Cordelia and Brooks both stared openmouthed at the spectacle of Xander Harris, wearing sweatpants and a tee shirt, barefoot and with shower-damp hair, holding his similarly-clad vampire lover three inches off the floor and kissing him soundly while grinding his hips against him in an unmistakable rhythm. Breaking the kiss, Spike looked over Xander's shoulder into the two shocked faces.

"Er, Xan," he said to the oblivious human, who was kissing and biting his neck. "What, baby?" Xander moaned. "Um ... audience, luv," the vampire answered. "Oh, fuck," the human replied, and lightly banged his head into the wall over Spike's shoulder. "Please, God, let it not be Angel," he begged, thumping the wall with his forehead again. "No, not Angel." Spike told him. "Oh, good. So, who is it?" Xander asked, still not daring to look. "The May Queen and your Kung Fu friend." Spike craned his neck over his lover's shoulder and looked at the clasped hands of the couple at the table.

"They look kind of cozy." Brooks snorted. "Look who's talking," he said.

Xander stepped back and let Spike slide down the wall until his feet touched the floor. He gave Spike a quick peck on the lips then turned to the table. He pulled a chair out and turned it around backward; hoping that by straddling it the tented front of his sweatpants would be less obvious. He rested his chin on the top of the chair and smiled at his friends. "Hi, Brooks," he said, in a casual voice. The dark man replied, "Hello, Xander," in an equally casual tone. Spike and Cordelia exchanged a look and burst out laughing, quickly joined by the two men.

Once they finally quit laughing, they all settled at the table, wiping their eyes. Cordelia levered herself out of her chair and went to refill her coffee cup. "Xander, do you want any coffee?" she asked. "Hell, yeah," he replied. "Got any cookies? I'm starving." He looked at Spike, who glanced over his shoulder at Cordelia and said, "I'll take a mug of the good stuff, if you don't mind, Cordy. Thanks, luv." Xander's eyes grew wide when he realized what Spike was asking for. Spike gave him a smug look. "'S alright, pet. Your buddy knows what's what around here. He guessed about Angel the other night and Cordelia set him straight about the rest of us." Xander closed his mouth with a snap and regained his composure. Looking at Brooks, he asked, "What gave Angel away?" Brooks smiled. "That guy never breathes."

Xander spluttered, "I told him to breathe, dammit. Didn't I, Spike?" The vampire murmured that indeed Angel had been instructed to breathe, but what did

Xander expect from the stubborn ponce? Cordelia returned to the table with coffee and cookies for Xander and a mug of warmed blood for Spike. While they ate, Brooks regaled the group with the story of all of the warnings Xander had given him when he'd decided to move out to Los Angeles. "He told me to keep an open mind, and not to be too quick to discount the impossible. He also gave me a stake," Brooks told them. "I hadn't been out here a week when I found out he wasn't as crazy as I thought. I was walking home one night from a club, when I got jumped by a guy." Spike broke in, "Let me guess – one of those bumpy-forehead, pointy-toothed guys?" Brooks laughed. "Exactly that kind of guy. Luckily, I was carrying Xan's stake, and the guy was slow as hell. I don't think he expected me to fight back. Still, it took me two tries – I missed his heart the first time. I think that just pissed him off. My aim was better on the second try, and he went 'poof'."

They chatted about the demon population of the greater L.A. area and ate cookies and drank coffee until Xander finally caught Cordelia's look – the one that was desperately trying to tell him to take his vampire and go away. Spike and Xander excused themselves and slipped back out the same door by which they had entered the kitchen; though their exit was much quieter than their entrance. Once they were alone again, Cordelia placed her hand lightly over Brooks'. "Is this where we were?" she asked with a smile. He smiled back, and then leaned in and brushed his lips softly over hers. "I thought we'd better move on over to this part before someone else comes tumbling in here," he whispered, and kissed her lightly. Cordelia

traced her tongue along his lower lip invitingly and said "Excellent idea," just before his mouth claimed hers.

Part Twenty-Four

Xander and Spike laughed halfway to their suite. At roughly the halfway point, Xander got distracted by the vampire's beautiful mouth and pinned him against the inside of the elevator to kiss him. They stumbled out of the elevator car on the fifth floor, and Spike pushed Xander down the hall toward their room. Once inside, they fell to the floor of the parlor in a frenzy of lips and teeth and tongues and hands and fingers, stripping off their clothes and trying to touch each other everywhere at once. Xander gasped as one of Spike's hands wrapped around his erection and the other snaked down over his hip and between the firm globes of his ass to tease against his entrance. He tangled a hand in the vampire's hair and brought their mouths together in a fiery kiss, and swept his other hand across his lover's hard chest to rub and pinch first one and then the other pebbled nipple. "Fuck, Will," he gasped. "I've never been so hard in my life."

Spike laughed into his lover's mouth. "Vampire blood," he panted.

"Works for me," Xander said.

In a sudden move, the vampire flipped them over, taking the top position. He pressed Xander into the

floor and kissed him, sweeping his tongue around the inside of his mouth relentlessly. As soon as he felt the dark man beneath him surrender completely to the kiss, Spike launched himself off of his lover's body and tried to run to the bedroom, laughing maniacally.

Xander flipped over and reached out to snag a foot, dragging Spike back down to the floor and underneath him. The human crawled over the vampire's body where it rested facedown on the floor. He closed his teeth on the back of Spike's neck and pressed his hard cock against the cleft of his ass. Xander could feel the effects of the small amount of Spike's blood he had drunk. He could feel his pulse in every part of his body; it thumped in his temples, his tongue, the tips of his fingers and through the long vein that ran up the underside of his cock. His sense of smell was heightened; he could pick out Spike's scent and his own, the scents of coffee and blood and cookies, as well as the unique, musky, heady smell of sex.

He used his feet to spread Spike's legs under him, and grasped the vampire's wrists in his hands to pin him to the floor, spread-eagled. Xander's sweat slicked their bodies, and he used it to allow him to slide his erection up and down against Spike's ass, gliding over his puckered opening and pressing against his sharp tailbone in long strokes. The vampire shifted his hips, angling for more contact and to increase the painful friction of the suite's carpet against his own sensitive cock.

Suddenly, the hard weight pinning Spike to the floor was gone, and he whimpered at the loss. His whimper turned into a surprised yelp as one of Xander's hands

came down hard on his ass with a resounding smack. He turned his head to see his lover kneeling beside him, grinning. Spike raised an eyebrow and wiggled his ass. Xander brought his hand down on the other cheek harder than before, and was rewarded with another yelp and a growl. He sprang to his feet, snatched Spike off the floor by one arm and dragged him into the bedroom, where he threw him bodily onto the bed. Spike landed on his back and looked up expectantly at the human.

Xander stalked the last couple of paces over to the bed with a wicked smile playing about his lips. He threw one leg over Spike and straddled him, allowing their hard cocks to rub together. Xander gathered both of the vampire's wrists in one hand and pulled them over his head to the ornate iron headboard. "Grab on and don't let go," he instructed, eyes glittering darkly. Spike obediently threaded his fingers around the iron bars and tilted his face up for a kiss. Xander obliged, leaning in to kiss the vampire's cool mouth possessively. As he leaned back, he swept the tube of lubricant off the nightstand and opened it.

Xander poured lubricant into his hand and then reached back. Spike watched the dark eyes close, knowing that his lover was preparing himself. He whimpered. Xander's eyes opened lazily, and he said, "What's the matter, baby?" Spike licked his suddenly dry lips and said, "I want to see, Xan. I want to watch you make yourself ready for me." A shudder ran through Xander's body, and he flushed a little. He tossed the tube onto the bed, and then moved so that he was straddling Spike's body with his back facing the vampire. He turned his head over his shoulder and twisted his body

slightly so that he could see his lover's face.

Spike drew in an unnecessary breath as Xander's slick fingers trailed down the vampire's chest and came to rest against his own opening. The fingers circled for a moment, and then one slipped inside. Spike watched the muscles in Xander's back and ass flex as internal muscles clenched and loosened around the finger. He pumped the finger in and out. "Another," Spike hissed, and Xander complied, moaning as he stretched himself. Spike's eyes never left the gorgeous sight before him, two fingers thrusting in and out of his lover's body, preparing him for the vampire's cock. "Three," Spike said, and again Xander complied, this time gasping aloud at the exquisite pleasure and pain as his body stretched to allow the intrusion. He rose up on his knees slightly, and then thrust himself down on his fingers, twisting them in, deeper and deeper with each stroke.

Xander's eyes never left Spike's face. He was stunned at the desire, lust and passion he saw there. His mild embarrassment at what he was doing was swept away when he saw how his actions were affecting the vampire. In Spike's open, longing, wanting face he could also see joy and exultation, and suddenly he understood. He understood that Spike and he had another thing in common - they both needed to be wanted. They needed to be wanted, desired for themselves and for no other reason. He realized that his actions were saying to Spike in no uncertain terms that he, Xander Harris, wanted the vampire - wanted him fully and completely - not as a means to an end, but as that end itself.

Xander pulled his hand away from himself and reversed his position. He leaned down and kissed Spike, sweeping his tongue around the vampire's mouth and groaning deeply as Spike's tongue thrust up into his. He found the tube of lubricant again, and poured more into his hand and spread it liberally over the vampire's already-dripping erection. Xander pulled back from the kiss and lifted himself onto his knees. Blue and brown eyes met and held as the human guided his lover's cock to his body and swiftly impaled himself on it in one long stroke. Without waiting for his body to adjust, Xander started sliding up and down on top of Spike, setting a brutal pace. The line between pleasure and pain blurred as he rode his lover. On each stroke he felt as if he would be torn in half, and then felt empty as Spike's cock pulled almost all the way out, only to fill him again to bursting point on the next stroke.

Spike's eyes stayed on Xander's, but he couldn't stop the flood of moans, groans and half-words that came from his mouth. He knew he wasn't making any sense, but he didn't care. The pace of their coupling made it impossible for him to think, much less speak coherently. He felt his orgasm building, and thrust up, nearly unseating Xander, who merely tightened his grip on the vampire's thighs and met the thrusts with his own. "Gonna ...come, Xan," Spike gasped, and then he did, shooting again and again into Xander's body as he howled and sobbed his release. Xander rode out the storm, finally coming to rest against his lover's chest when Spike relaxed under him. They lay quietly for a moment, and then Xander began crawling up Spike's body, allowing the vampire's softening cock to slip out of his body with a wet sound.

Xander crawled up to the top of the bed and placed the crown of his still-hard cock at Spike's lips. He wrapped his hands around Spike's, which were still threaded around the iron bars of the headboard. He looked down into sparkling blue eyes and said, "Suck me, baby." The vampire's mouth opened, and he began licking and sucking just the head of Xander's dripping erection. Xander felt one of Spike's hands slip out from under his and reach between his legs. He groaned as three fingers slammed into his stretched, slick hole, just as Spike sucked him down to the root. Xander grabbed the headboard harder and began thrusting his body back and forth, first into the vampire's mouth and then back against the fingers inside him. He knew he couldn't last, and when Spike's fingers found and pressed his prostate, he poured his orgasm into Spike's tight throat.

Spike continued to lick and suck at him until Xander's cock was completely soft, and then let it fall from his lips. The human fell onto the bed with a sigh, and sighed again as Spike draped himself over his warm chest, and kissed him deeply. Xander stroked his hands down the cool back, and then hugged the vampire tightly to his chest. "Will ...you make me feel – God, I don't have the words." Xander ran his hand over Spike's soft waves and buried his face against his lover's neck. Spike laughed softly. "It's OK, pet – I think I made up some new ones a while ago; we can use those." He felt the human grin against his neck. "I don't think I can spell those words," Xander snorted, "too many vowels."

Part Twenty-Five

Xander sipped from his mug of coffee and followed the steady stream of thumps emanating from the gym. Turning the corner, he leaned against the doorframe to watch Buffy pound the heavy bag. She was wearing a pair of bike shorts and a sports bra, both faded pink. Her hair was swept back in a ponytail and she was sweating freely as she rhythmically rained blows onto the bag with both her fists and her feet. He laughed at himself just a little when he realized he was paying more attention to her fighting form than to her figure. Great, he thought, most of my life all I wanted to do was ogle Buffy – and now I'd rather think about a different blonde. He smiled at the memory of slipping out of Spike's arms earlier, and the soft sounds the vampire had made as he wrapped his arms around Xander's abandoned pillow and drifted back to sleep.

Buffy caught sight of Xander and danced over to the door, peeling tape from her knuckles. She pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Hey, Xan. You're up early," she observed, tilting his mug to steal a sip of his coffee. He smiled down at her. "Yeah, those damn vampires want to keep us up all night, but I thought I'd go up to the roof and work out in the sun. Wanna come?" She nodded and replied, "Yeah! I could use some stretching work – can you show me some of the warm-ups you and your friends were doing?" He agreed, and they headed for the roof. Xander marveled a little that here was the Slayer, asking him, the Zeppo, for fitness advice. The mind boggled

They reached the roof and walked to an open, flat area that had been planted with grass. They kicked off their shoes. Xander led Buffy through some simple exercises to get warm, and then started challenging her with some more advanced moves. "Try this one," he said, as he seated himself on the ground with his legs straight out in front of him. He pressed his fisted hands to the ground next to his hips and raised his entire body, still in the same position, to balance on his fists. Corded muscles stood out on his arms as he held the position and took and released seven deep breaths. He lowered his body in a controlled motion, and then turned to Buffy. He grinned at the stunned expression on her face. "Your turn," he taunted.

She seated herself beside him and tried to mimic the move. She couldn't seem to get both her heels and her butt off the ground at the same time, and teetered back and forth. Xander showed her how to lock the position before rising, and where to find the balance point. Within minutes, she had it. They both smiled as she executed it perfectly. "You're a good teacher, Xan," she said, back on the ground. "You explain things clearly and you don't get frustrated, unlike some vampires and Watchers I could name." He smiled. "I wish all my students were as easy to teach as you – at least you can follow directions."

"Show me another one," she pleaded, "this is fun." He thought for a moment, and then his eyes lit up. "I bet you can do this." He knelt and placed his elbows on the ground, forming a triangle between them and his cupped hands. He placed his head down in front of his hands and rose in a headstand. Once the headstand was stable, he tilted his hips forward and arched his

back so that his entire body formed a taut crescent shape. He shifted his hands apart and braced his palms on the ground. Once he was steady, he lifted his head and balanced on his forearms. He bent his knees to bring the bottoms of his feet nearly into contact with the back of his head. He turned his head and grinned at Buffy. "It's called the Scorpion," he panted. She goggled at him while he slowly lowered himself back to the ground.

They worked on the posture until Buffy got the hang of it, stopping several times to laugh hysterically when she overcorrected and fell on her ass. Once she had the move down, they sat side by side on the grass to take a breather. Xander took a deep breath and turned to her.

Before he could speak, she touched a finger to his lips and said, "Don't, Xander." He looked at her quizzically and she removed the finger. "Don't apologize to me," she said, smiling. "I don't need it. And, if you don't apologize to me, I don't have to apologize to you." He grabbed her hand and held it. "Buff," he whispered, "I was a shitty friend." She clasped his hand back and looked him in the eye. "So?" she asked, "who wasn't? It was the end of the freaking world, Xander – none of us got through it in good shape. I was a shitty friend to you for a long time before you left. I couldn't see it at the time. All I saw was my own pain, not the pain I was inflicting. God, I was full of myself." Xander smiled at her. "Remember the speeches?" he asked in a small voice. "Don't remind me," she groaned. "I'm just lucky nobody staked me out of self-preservation."

"You should know by now that I'm a pretty simple

person," she told him. "I need things to be cut and dried. You always were my friend, and you always will be. That's enough for me. You needed to be away for a while; you needed to not be here. I can understand that. You sacrificed so much to fight at my side – I could never begrudge you the chance at a normal life." Xander looked into her open, happy face and was hardly able to believe that this was the same person he'd left behind so many years ago. She'd been through so much, yet she could still smile and forgive and love. The two old friends laughed together for a moment. "So, we're OK? Just like that?" Xander asked. She nodded, "Just like that. You know me, Xan – save the world, love my friends, sleep with a vampire." Xander pulled the petite blonde into his arms and hugged her tightly. "I love you, Buffy. I always have," he whispered into her hair. "I know, Xan – me too," she replied against his chest. After a moment, she started struggling. As soon as he released her, she said, "OK, enough with the encounter group – show me more cool tricks!" He happily obliged, and pretended not to notice as she wiped a tear from her face. It was only fair, since she pretended not to notice when he did the same.

"This is cozy," Spike drawled from the doorway of the small atrium that looked out over the roof of the hotel. Inside the specially treated glass room, Angel sat in a chair next to a large, padded chaise lounge and watched Buffy and Xander contort themselves into pretzels in the sunshine. "What do you call it?" the younger vampire asked, "Stalker Hut?" Angel spared his grand-child a glance and ignored the question. "It's only 11:00 - what are you doing up?" he queried.

Spike looked at the floor, then walked into the room and seated himself on the lounge at Angel's side. Angel looked at his face and barked a short laugh. "You, too, huh?" he asked ruefully. "I sometimes can't sleep after Buffy gets up either," he admitted. "Christ," Spike groaned, "we're a matched set of poofs, aren't we?" Angel shook his head. "That we are, my William, that we are."

"Looks like the Slayer's doing the old forgive and forget," Spike observed, seeing the two old friends embrace. Angel smiled. "Buffy can be very forgiving. It's a damn good thing, too." They looked out the windows in silence for long moments.

"I love her," Angel said quietly, not looking at Spike. "I mean, I've always loved her, since she was sixteen; but now, it's different. It's like she's a part of me." Spike regarded his grand-sire seriously. "She is a part of you, Angel. You make her complete. Oddly enough, you're what makes her more human." The younger vampire snorted. "I used to wonder how you could love a human more than your own childer; it used to eat me up inside." Angel's dark eyes settled on his face. "Oh, Will - how could you think such a thing? I didn't always like you, but I've never stopped loving you." Spike's eyes opened wide in shock, and Angel couldn't hold back a soft laugh. "You didn't know, did you?" When the blond head shook at him, he sighed. "Childe, I always loved you. I loved your humanity." He laughed bitterly. "I loved it as much as Angelus hated it. He - I tried so hard to tear it out of you, but it always stayed. That's why you're so different from most vampires - your core of humanity was never destroyed, no matter how hard I tried. It made you unique."

Spike simply stared at his grand-sire, unable to form coherent thoughts. Angel moved from his chair to sit beside the smaller man. He took a slim, pale hand into his own larger one. He looked into Spike's ice blue eyes as he stroked the cool hand. "Maybe I haven't been clear in the past, Will, so I'm just going to tell you outright. You can call me a poof and a ponce all you want later. When Drusilla turned you, I was furious. She had no right to sire anyone, but she took what she wanted and didn't care who got hurt. If I hadn't stepped in and taken you away from her, you would have died like so many of her childer did. I wanted you, and I took you for my own." Angel paused.

"I'm not sorry I did it, Will. I'm sorry for so many things that I did in the past, but I will never be sorry about that. We were magnificent demons, you and I." Angel's voice was husky, and he saw Spike's eyes flashing yellow and knew his were doing the same. He smiled gently and squeezed the hand he held. "We can be good men, Will. We have good hearts; they may not beat, but they can love. We have good souls."

Spike kept his eyes lowered. He was truly stunned. He had always thought that Angel saw him as an abomination; a mistake that Dru had made in a flight of fancy. Knowing that his grand-sire, the only true sire he'd ever known, loved him was almost more than he could bear. It occurred to him that he'd spent the past nine years coming to terms with having a soul, while guarding that same soul from the risks of loving and being loved. Sure, he loved Dawn and her family, and Willow and Cordelia, but not the way he loved his sire, and not the way he desperately wanted to love Xander.

Without looking up, he made the one gesture that he knew would speak volumes to Angel. Turning his head to the side, he bared his neck and whispered, "Sire."

Angel's mouth dropped open in shock. He had never imagined that he would see Spike make this submissive offer to him ever again. They had not renewed their blood bond in over a hundred years. He placed his hands on Spike's shoulders, and leaned forward to place a soft kiss on the side of his favored child's neck, then sat back. When Spike's eyes rose to meet his, he smiled. "No, Spike," he said. "After all this time, you and I are met as equals." At the ritual words they shared a long look, and the younger vampire shifted over to make room on the chaise. Angel settled into the space, pressing the entire length of his body against Spike's side. He threw an arm around Spike's shoulders and drew the blond head down against his chest, and began stroking his silky hair. Silently, they watched Buffy and Xander.

Part Twenty-Six

"Oh, shit!" Angel exclaimed as the two vampires and two humans walked into the kitchen. Cordelia was sprawled on the floor, her head resting in Willow's lap as her body thrashed from side to side. Dawn sat on the floor next to her with a pen and a notepad, writing down the words that Cordelia gritted out painfully. Buffy pushed past the men and went to the cabinet, grabbing a prescription bottle and a glass. "Vision," she said to Xander as she filled the glass with water. Cordelia went limp in Willow's embrace, then opened her eyes and grimaced. "Ow," she said succinctly, taking the proffered painkillers and water from Buffy. "You'd think the Powers would be a little nicer to me

and make that not hurt so badly," she complained.

Dawn helped her up and settled her at the table, where she dropped her head into her hands. "What did you see?" Angel asked her gently. She grimaced again. "The usual, death and destruction, blah, blah, blah," she joked. She looked up at Dawn. "Drusilla is going to attack the girls, the Slayerettes, in Sunnydale. I think it's tonight. I saw her attacking your old house with three or four other vampires." Dawn got up and rushed to the phone to call the house and warn the girls. Once she returned to the table, she looked around the group. "Well," she said, "I guess this is what we've been waiting for."

"Yeah," Cordelia said, "I get that, but why do the Powers care? They usually don't give a crap unless they're involved in some way." Angel answered her, "There's really no way to know, but they are protective of future prophecies. It could be that there's someone at the house who is needed later, and that person will get killed if Dru isn't stopped." Buffy broke in, "Doesn't really matter anyway – we've got to get there. Dawn, how soon can you and Jase and Sara be ready to go?" Dawn answered, "Soon," and dashed away to get ready. Buffy turned to Xander. "We have a van that's sun proofed, so the rest of us can take that." He nodded, and she turned to Willow. "Wills, we need you with us; are you up to doing a little mojo at the house? Just a few wards and bolstering the de-invite spells?" The redhead nodded.

Angel looked at his Seer, whose head was resting on her arms. "Cordelia won't be in any shape to travel until tomorrow. Will you be OK here?" he asked.

Xander spoke up, "I think I can find you some company for tonight, if you're up to it, Cordy. I think maybe Brooks could be persuaded to come hang for a while." Cordelia smiled wanly at his light tone and nodded. With their assignments decided the group dispersed. Angel swept Cordelia up in his arms to take her to bed, followed by Buffy, who carried the water glass and prescription bottle.

Xander remained seated at the table. Spike walked behind him and dropped his hands onto the human's shoulders. "This is it, isn't it?" Xander said. "Yes, luv, this is it. You ready?" the vampire's voice was soft. Xander leaned back, and Spike wrapped his arms around his lover, bringing his head down to nuzzle against the deliciously warm neck. After a moment, Xander's arms came up to wrap around Spike's neck. "I'm ready," Xander said. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

Willow opted to join Dawn and her family in the SUV, while Spike, Xander, Angel and Buffy piled into the plain van that had no windows except those in front. The back of the van was curtained off from the front, rendering it completely lightproof. Buffy settled into the driver's seat, and gave Xander a dirty look when he grinned and looked at her questioningly. "Yes," she groaned, "I finally learned to drive well enough for Angel." At the vampire's snort from the back she added, "OK, OK – he still won't let me drive his convertible." She rolled her eyes.

Xander climbed into the back and settled himself next to Spike on one of the two long seats. Angel sat sideways across the other. Spike and Xander

exchanged a look as Buffy pulled the van out of the parking garage with a squeal of tires. "We may get killed," Xander whispered, "but at least we don't have to sing."

Shortly after they reached the highway, Spike shifted around in his seat so that he could lean back against Xander, who obligingly wrapped his arms around the vampire's chest, holding him close. He snuggled his nose into Spike's neck and inhaled the scent of smoke and rain. Within minutes, both men were asleep. Angel sighed as he looked at them. He rarely got to see his child so relaxed. In sleep, Spike's features dropped the ever-present tension – he was beautiful. His blond hair gleamed against Xander's dark sweater, and a few tendrils of the human's sable hair had fallen forward against his pale neck. Xander's face smoothed out in repose, and Angel took the opportunity to really look at the young man. The years had changed him, bringing new lines and furrows to his handsome face, yet he still had the same cupid's bow mouth that Angel had noticed the first time he'd seen the boy. He saw a notepad on the floor of the van and stooped to retrieve it. It had a pencil secured in the metal coil at its top, and he eased it free and began to sketch the study in contrasts before him.

The only sounds in the van were Xander's breathing, Buffy singing along quietly to the radio and the gentle scratch of pencil on paper.

Part Twenty-Seven

A covered carport had been added to the Summers' house on Revello Drive years before. Buffy pulled the van under its shelter and released her seatbelt. She parted the curtain behind her and smiled. The two vampires and Xander were all asleep. Xander was leaning against the armrest of the seat with Spike clutched to his chest. Angel was sprawled across the back seat. His body was leaned forward; his head was pillowed on his arm, which rested on the seat in front of him. His other arm was draped over the seat, and his hand rested atop one of Xander's, which in turn rested atop one of Spike's.

"Angel," she whispered, "Come on, honey, wake up." Buffy knew that there would be a row if Spike woke and saw Angel touching Xander; she was well aware of the younger vampire's jealous nature. Angel's chocolate eyes opened, and he smiled at his mate. She gestured at his hand, and he nodded and pulled it back. Buffy leaned further into the back and tapped Xander on the knee. "Wake up, everybody, we're here," she announced in a louder voice. She levered herself out of the front seat and came around to open the sliding door. The three men yawned and stretched.

As they piled out of the van, Willow and Dawn came out the back door. Buffy hugged her sister, and then her best friend. "Mojo all ... mojo-ed?" she asked. The witch nodded. "We're warded out the wazoo, and all vamps except for our two are really, really uninvited." Buffy nodded. Angel walked around the side of the van and enfolded Buffy in his arms. She looked a little surprised, but hugged him back tightly. "Good morning, sleepyhead," she giggled. He kissed her

temple, then released her and walked into the house. Buffy and Willow exchanged a look. Buffy shook her head in bemusement. "I don't know what that's all about," she said, "but I am not complaining." Willow shrugged. The redhead looked around the far side of the van for Spike and Xander, and then pulled back, blushing. She grabbed one of Dawn's and one of Buffy's arms and pulled them forward. All three girls took in the sight of their childhood friend being thoroughly kissed by William the Bloody. Willow cleared her throat and the two men separated reluctantly.

Inside, the house was controlled chaos. Dawn explained to Xander that she and Jase owned a house nearby and that the family's old house was more of a command center. None of the potentials actually lived there, but someone was on duty at all times. Most of the potentials had settled down in Sunnydale. Several attended college, a few of them even had burgeoning families. Dawn took Xander around and introduced him to those he didn't know, while Angel and Spike went to the kitchen for blood. Everyone gathered in the old dining room for a briefing. Dawn took the floor and explained what they knew, which was not much. A tall, dark-haired girl reported on the whereabouts of all of the potentials, and it was decided that they should simply wait for nightfall and for Dru to make her move. The meeting dispersed.

Xander wandered into the den and settled on one end of the couch. Spike stripped off his duster and tossed it over a chair. He walked back to Xander, pushed his knees apart and settled on the floor between his lover's feet, leaning back and resting his chin on Xander's leg. Xander absently stroked the soft hair at the nape of the

vampire's neck. Glancing over to a pile of schoolbooks on the end table, he laughed softly. He reached out to snag one and turned it over in his hands. "I used this book when I was in school," he laughed. "There's a poem in here that I loved ..." His voice trailed off as he flipped through the pages. After a few fruitless minutes, he consulted the book's table of contents and found what he was looking for. "You'll like this one, Will," he told Spike. "It's my favorite, but Shari found it offensive – she took it too literally." He cleared his throat and began to read.

"Nothing is plumb, level or square:
the studs are bowed, the joists
are shaky by nature, no piece fits
any other piece without a gap
or pinch, and bent nails
dance all over the surfacing
like maggots. By Christ
I am no carpenter. I built
the roof for myself, the walls
for myself, the floors
for myself, and got
hung up in it myself. I
danced with a purple thumb
at this house-warming, drunk
with my prime whiskey: rage.
Oh I spat rage's nails
into the frame-up of my work:
it held. It settled plumb,
level, solid, square and true
for that great moment. Then
it screamed and went on through,
skewing as wrong the other way.
God damned it. This is hell,

but I planned it, I sawed it,
I nailed it, and I
will live in it until it kills me.
I can nail my left palm
to the left-hand cross-piece but
I can't do everything myself
I need a hand to nail the right,
a help, a love, a you, a wife."

Spike laughed. "The missus thought you were insulting her, eh?" Xander gave him a rueful look. "Yeah – too literal. She thought I was bullshitting her when I gave her my interpretation of it." Spike held out his hand and Xander passed the book to him. Spike stood and walked over to the discarded duster, digging his glasses out of one of the pockets and putting them on. Back on the floor, he read the poem slowly, twice. "OK, poetry boy, give me your interpretation," he challenged. Xander smiled. "It's about accepting your life for what it is – living in the house that you built, no matter how shoddy the construction. It turns out that the poet wrote it while he was in some sort of mid-life crisis. The part I like, though, is when the house settles for one perfect moment 'plumb, level, solid, square and true for that great moment'. Of course, it all goes straight to Hell in the next second, but that's not the point. What?" Spike was staring at him with his mouth hanging open.

"Sorry, pet, I didn't quite expect the literary criticism. You surprised me." Spike raised an eyebrow when Xander's grin widened. "I like surprising you," he said. "Good thing," Spike observed, "because you've done nothing but since you showed up." He turned back to the book in his hands, settling himself back against the

warm human. He flipped pages, stopping now and then to read a few lines, and then moving on. "Here we are," he said, finding something he liked.

"The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.
Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in his slow-chapped power.
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Thorough the iron gates of life:
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run."

It was Xander's turn to look dumbstruck. Spike's voice rolled over the words, infusing them with heat as they dripped from his lips. Blue eyes met brown, and a wicked smile curved the vampire's lips. Xander shook his head. "You could read the phone book and make it sound sexy, couldn't you, Will?" he asked. Spike laid the book on the floor and rose to kneel between Xander's legs, resting his forearms on his lover's thighs. He leaned in and brushed their lips together lightly. They shared a tender kiss, and then Xander grasped Spike's hands to pull him onto the couch. He pushed him to the opposite end, and then leaned down to retrieve the textbook. Handing the book to Spike, Xander reclined back and plopped his feet into the

vampire's lap. "Read to me," he demanded imperiously. Laughing, Spike opened the book and began reading.

Xander heard a small noise from the door and looked up to see Willow standing there. She was giving them the dreaded puppy-eyed look that Xander could not resist. He prodded Spike's thigh and looked at him questioningly. Not faltering in his reading, the vampire nodded. Willow was instantly by Xander's side, kicking off her shoes and snuggling into the crook of her best friend's arm. She turned on her side and draped an arm over his chest. He pulled her close and rubbed circles on her back. Eyes closed, they both listened to Spike, who read at a measured pace, his accent returning to the clean diction and precise pronunciation of his Victorian origins. He finished the poem he was reading and paused. Willow spoke, not raising her head from Xander's chest. "Read something epic, Spike. I could listen to you all day," she said dreamily. Xander grunted his agreement.

"As you wish, my lady," was Spike's gallant reply. After flipping through the book for a moment he began to read again. Xander drifted, eyes closed, hearing and feeling the deep rumble of Spike's voice as he read the opening stanzas of Book 1 of Paradise Lost. He could tell that his lover was really enjoying reading to them, and marveled once again in the changes in Spike. The Big Bad of the old days may have liked poetry, but he would never have agreed to read it to any of the Scoobies, and certainly not while wearing reading glasses. Xander resolutely pushed thoughts of the upcoming evening out of his head and concentrated on Spike's voice.

Xander felt Spike shift, and noticed that Angel had joined them. The large vampire had settled himself on the floor at Spike's feet, leaning back against the sofa. Xander found that he was more surprised by Angel taking such a submissive place to sit, than by his seeking out company. Over the few days in L.A. Xander had seen the changes in Angel, too. Where before, isolation and outright broodiness had kept Angel apart, he had become much more open. The guy still wasn't outgoing or anything, but Xander had to admit that he didn't mind having him around. Just as Angel settled, Buffy walked past the door of the den. She did a classic double take, and stood for a moment with her mouth hanging open. At a gesture from her mate, she walked into the room and folded herself into his arms, resting her head on his chest and closing her eyes. Spike and Xander exchanged a soft smile and the vampire continued to read.

NOTE: Xander's poem is "Love Song: I and Thou" by Alan Dugan; Spike's is the latter half of "To His Coy Mistress" by Andrew Marvell.

Part Twenty-Eight

Xander was alone, sitting on the back steps of the Summers' house, waiting. Over Spike's objections, it had been decided that he would split off from the group, hoping to draw Drusilla out. Buffy, Angel and Spike were lurking about, but trying to stay far enough

from the house so as not to be sensed by Dru. Xander lifted his hand to touch the small gold cross that hung from a thin leather thong there. Dawn had fastened it around his neck and pressed a stake into his hand as he left the house. Taking no chances, he'd also stopped by the van to retrieve his chain whip from his weapons bag, and it was coiled in his pocket, the handle hanging out for easy retrieval.

By the time Spike had finished reading Book 1 of Paradise Lost, Dawn, Jase, Sara and two of the potentials had joined the group in the den, listening to the vampire's soothing voice. The setting of the sun and the subsequent arrival of more potentials had broken everyone out of the calm quiet suffusing the room. Back in the dining room, Dawn gave everyone their assignments, sending the Slayer, the vampires and Xander outside, keeping the girls safely inside with Willow ready to cast any needed protection spells.

Xander breathed deeply and tried to stay relaxed. He rose to his feet and leaned against the porch rail with feigned nonchalance. He heard a rustling noise from the yard's periphery and pointedly did not turn toward it. His hand went to his pocket. A vampire burst from the trees and ran at him. Xander pivoted, drawing the chain whip from his pocket. He swung it in a complete circle over his head, and then struck out at the approaching vampire. As the end of the jointed metal strand wrapped itself around the vampire's neck, Xander closed the distance between them and caught the end of the chain whip in his free hand. With a snapping motion, he pulled his hands apart as hard as he could. The metal whip closed and decapitated the unfortunate vampire, which dusted immediately.

Xander coiled the whip and placed it back in his pocket before he turned toward the sound of soft clapping. His breath left his body as he turned and saw Drusilla standing at the edge of the tree line. She walked forward slowly, still clapping her hands. Her long black hair curled over her shoulders and spilled down the front of her plain, black top. She was wearing a pair of plain black pants and what appeared to be boots. Xander had a sudden thought that he'd never seen her in anything but romantic dresses, and that she looked infinitely more dangerous in the modern attire.

"Oh, kitten," she crooned. "You've got teeth now!" Her voice was light, and she laughed merrily. "My little plaything never had a chance." Xander took a deep breath and gave her a sardonic smile that came nowhere near touching his eyes. "Good grief, Dru," he said, "that one still had the grave dirt on his jacket. Did you make him especially for me? Ten minutes ago?" She moved in closer, and he turned his body to keep her directly in front of him. Her black eyes were snapping, and he thought that she looked very beautiful.

"Now, now, kitten, don't get all growly with me. I just wanted you to have something to play with. I can be a sweet mummy when I choose. I got you a toy and you broke it, and you didn't even say thank you." Xander snorted, "Oh, sorry – I didn't mean to be rude. Thank you, crazy person, for the evil undead toy – it was great while it lasted." She tilted her head and stepped closer. Suddenly, her expression hardened, and her eyes became cold and glittering. She sniffed the air and advanced another step. "My Spike is here," she said,

"and my Daddy, too. And that screechy Slayer girl. They're nearby, wanting to protect you, little one." She paused and began circling Xander slowly. He circled with her. She sniffed again, and then suddenly vamped out. Sniffing once again, she stopped moving and looked directly into Xander's eyes. "I see Spike has been doing more than wanting. His smell is all over you, kitten. Spike's been a naughty, naughty boy. He will have to pay for touching you."

Xander snorted again. "Let's leave my sex life out of this, OK?" He took a deep breath and asked the question that had been burning in his brain for six months. "Why did you kill my wife, Dru?" At his words, she smiled brilliantly, and Xander thought that it was the most horrifying sight he'd ever seen. Her tongue flicked out to sweep over sharp teeth and fangs. "Oh, your little china doll," she sighed in remembered pleasure. "She was a tasty one, so hot and sweet; and the tiny one within." The vampire moaned and licked her lips again, and Xander saw white. He swung the chain whip again. Drusilla put her hand up before her face and caught it, not noticing as it cut into her palm. She snatched the weapon from his hand and dropped it on the ground. Xander stalked closer to the vampire, his words reverberating with his steps. "Why. Did. You. Kill. Her. You. Bitch," he demanded, stopping barely two feet from her.

She looked down at the ground in an almost shy gesture, and then her head snapped back up, their eyes meeting. She dropped all pretenses of shyness and craziness, and Xander knew he was looking into the eyes of a pure demon. Her words were as measured as his had been. "Because. I. Wanted. To."

Xander lunged at her with his stake, and pinned her to the ground, its point at her heart. His eyes filled with tears, but they did not fall. "One last question," he ground out through clenched teeth, "and I do mean last. How did you get into my house?" She giggled merrily, and he pressed the stake further into her chest until she stopped. They stared at one another for a long moment, and then a smile curved her lips. "Oh, kitten," she sighed, "what makes you think that was the first time I had been there? Your little china doll, she was so sweet. So eager to help the nice lady whose car had broken down. She even invited me in and gave me a glass of water. That was over a year ago." Her sparkling eyes looked up into his shocked ones. "Really, kitten," she chided, "you should have warned her about inviting strangers into your home." She bucked under him and launched his body across the yard.

She picked up the chain whip from the ground, walked over to him and dropped it lightly onto his chest. He lay on the ground, stunned. "It's not yet time for you to join me," she said. "But, be a dear and give Spike a message. Tell him I can't wait for him to meet his little brother." She turned and disappeared into the trees. Xander sat up on the dewed grass and allowed his tears to fall. When Spike's arms wrapped around him, he leaned into his lover and sobbed. Xander hardly noticed when Angel and Spike hauled him to his feet and led him into the house.

They manhandled him up the stairs and into one of the bedrooms. Angel helped Spike remove the unresisting human's shoes and shirt and put him into bed. Spike

toed off his boots and climbed into bed with his lover, enfolding the shaking body in his arms. He gave Angel a grim smile as the dark vampire left the room, turning off the overhead light and closing the door softly. Spike leaned against the headboard with Xander curled into his chest; the two men sat silently in a circle of lamplight.

Spike rubbed soothing circles on Xander's back, lightly tracing his fingers over smooth, warm skin. He had been close enough to hear every word Drusilla had spoken. Aside from that, he had also been close enough to observe her demeanor, and that scared him most of all. She was even more lucid than she had been at their last meeting. She was strong, controlled and as sane as he'd ever seen her and he didn't know which trait bothered him the most. Spike was positive that he didn't like her comment about his "little brother", knowing that it meant Dru had taken another childe. A childe of Dru's that had actually been raised by her would likely be vicious, unstable and at least partially insane.

Spike sighed and looked down at the stricken human in his arms. Xander clung to him weakly, his eyes open but unseeing. His tears had stopped, but he was unresponsive. Spike understood. He knew that Drusilla's chiding comment that Xander should have warned his wife about inviting people in was reverberating in his lover's head. He could almost hear Xander's anguish, knowing that he was berating himself for not telling Shari about his past and the terrible things that he knew to be true.

Spike gathered Xander's body more tightly against his

own and rested the dark head on his shoulder. "Xan, sweetheart," he whispered, "come back to me now. You can't stay locked up in that head of yours all night. I need you out here with me." Warm arms tightened around him, but there was no other response. Spike bent his head to Xander's ear and continued speaking softly. "Come on, luv, as much as I'd love to, we can't stay like this all night. Come on back now. Please. Can you do that for me?" Xander sighed and tightened his arms even more, and rubbed his face against his lover's shoulder. He drew and released a couple of shaky breaths, then swallowed audibly. Sighing again he said in a small voice, "I'm here." Spike hugged him. "Good. Glad you're back."

They sat quietly for a few more moments. Xander shifted, and Spike released him enough for the mortal to turn so he was lying on his back between Spike's legs, with his own legs straightened out in front of him and his back resting against the vampire's hard chest. Spike hooked his chin over Xander's shoulder and kept his arms wrapped around him in a loose embrace. "She was right," Xander said, his voice toneless. "I should have told Shari. I should have warned her." Spike stroked a hand lightly up and down Xander's arm. "God, Xan," he said quietly, "what were you supposed to do? 'Oh, honey, by the way - vampires are real, so don't ever invite one in, OK? I'll be in the basement if you need me.'"

Xander thought for a moment. "How about, 'I'm going to be home a little late tonight, so I just wanted to tell you that most of the really creepy stuff in fairytales is true, and the mouth of Hell is located in California and do I need to pick anything up on my way home?'" He

laughed shortly. "I didn't want to tell her that stuff. It should never have touched her." Spike was happy that his voice was getting stronger, but he could hear the deep sadness and regret in it. He rubbed his face against Xander's silky hair and hugged him tighter. "Xan, you know she was just pushing your buttons, taunting you. It's part of the game." Spike's voice was tight.

Xander sat up suddenly, throwing off Spike's arms. He turned to face the vampire, his eyes alive with anger. "This is not a game," he gritted out. Spike closed his hands on Xander's shaking shoulders and ran them up and down his arms soothingly. "I know, sweetheart. It's not a game to you – but it is a game to her. Fucking Angelus taught it to her. It's how he made her. He taught her that it's not enough to take the one you want; you have to destroy them first." Spike sighed softly. "Angelus would spend months stalking his prey. He'd follow them; learn all about their life, then destroy every single thing that was important to his victim. Why do you think she's so crazy?" Spike kept up the soothing contact until Xander relaxed back onto the bed and leaned against his chest again.

"She wasn't crazy when he started with her," Spike mused. "She did have second sight, but she wasn't actually insane. The combination of seeing the future and knowing what was going to happen and then having it actually happen is what broke her mind. Then he turned her and threw the demon into the mix." Xander clapped his hands together. "Blam! Super psycho – just add blood." His voice was still strained. Spike nodded against Xander's temple. "Pretty much. I don't know what's changed, though. She's as lucid as

I've ever seen her. She was fucking scary out there. Those fledges she brought along were just cannon fodder; the two I killed were fresh out of the grave." Xander nodded. "She didn't come here to do any real damage – tonight was just part of the hunt. Shit, Spike!" he exclaimed suddenly. "God damn it – I had her – I had the stake in her chest. I could have ended this, and I let her distract me. Fuck!" He buried his face in his hands. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

Spike rubbed the back of his head. "It's OK, Xan – she was unlikely to let you get her. She could have thrown you off at any time. She just let you pin her so she could mess with your mind. She wants you to stew for a while. She wants you to be afraid." Xander turned to face Spike, brown eyes searching blue ones. "I am afraid, Spike. I'm afraid that I'll screw up and not avenge Shari and Lex's deaths; that I'll let them down. I'm afraid that she's going to get someone else I care about – Buffy or Willow or Dawn or you." Spike held his gaze, and reached out to grasp Xander's hand. "I know you're afraid," he said in a low voice. "We're all afraid. Hell, I'm afraid. Big Bad Chicken, that's me." He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. His eye's never left Xander's.

"Everyone leaves me, Xander. Angelus left me and Dru left me and Buffy left me. Someday you'll leave me, whether it's because of you or me or outside forces or if it's because you're mortal and you'll die someday – doesn't matter." He shook his head ruefully. "I'm afraid of that; terrified, actually. I'm afraid of being left again, of not being loved enough again. But, damn it, Xan; I'm more afraid of not taking the chance than I am of the pain. I've been hiding for the last nine years

because I didn't have the balls to take a chance. Then - out of nowhere - you come to me; and you're so different, but you're still the same. And I couldn't stop wanting to be close to you, wanting you. In nine years, I was never even tempted to try. Then you walk up to my front door and I was lost." Xander smiled softly and laid his hand against Spike's cheek as the vampire continued speaking.

"I once told Buffy and Angel that I was love's bitch." Spike turned his head and kissed Xander's palm, then brought his eyes back to the human's. "Well, I still am. I know this is terrible timing, and probably the last thing you want to hear, but I've got to say it. I'm falling in love with you, Xander. I know you aren't ready to even think along those lines, but I can't hide anymore - it hurts too fucking much. But, I can wait for you. I'm good at waiting."

It was Xander's turn to reach out and pull Spike to his chest and hold him tightly. He was stunned at what the vampire had told him. He had already acknowledged to himself that he was starting to care for Spike, but had pushed any deep analysis of his feelings away, to be considered after the business of avenging his wife and son. He concentrated on the feel and scent of the man in his arms, breathing him in with each breath. He turned his mind to Shari, and realized that the hurt was not as bad as it had been. He could visualize her beautiful, delicate face without feeling a sharp stab in his heart. He smiled sadly. He bent his head and kissed Spike's temple. "Am I?" he whispered into soft blond waves. "Are you what?" Spike said softly. Xander smiled. "Earlier, you called me sweetheart. Am I your sweetheart?" Spike snuggled his head deeper into

Xander's chest. "Yes, Xan, you are. If you can call me 'baby', then I can call you 'sweetheart'. Sometimes. When we're alone. Then I can go buy myself a dress and have my name legally changed to Nancy. The things I do for you." Xander could feel the grin on Spike's face.

They pulled apart and looked into each other's eyes. When Xander looked into Spike's eyes he saw concern, and a little bit of laughter, and what he now recognized as love. Spike loves me, he thought. And why is this not freaking me out? Their lips came together in a light kiss, their arms wrapping around to hold one another tightly. Xander trailed soft kisses across Spike's face and up to his temple, and then he rubbed his cheek against it. "I guess we should go down and figure out our next move, huh?" he asked reluctantly. Spike's reply was equally reluctant. "I guess so. Let's get this done so we can go home to bed."

Part Twenty-Nine

It was good to be home, Spike thought, as he dropped their bags inside the front door. Xander and Willow came up the steps slowly, waving to Buffy as she drove away in the van. As the two humans entered the house, Spike turned and wrapped his arms around Xander, who hugged him back tightly. Willow pressed herself against one side of the hug, and they each shifted an arm to envelop her. When the two men leaned their heads in and began kissing, she slipped

out of their grasp and closed the front door. She leaned back against it and shamelessly stared at them.

They look good together, she thought, light and dark, yin and yang – but more hard than soft. Both of them all angles and planes, from their faces and their chests to Xander's knee, crooked between Spike's legs, pressing their thighs together. Their kiss deepened, and Willow could see their tongues dueling, could see them licking and nipping at one another's lips. Spike's hand carded through Xander's dark hair and curled there, pulling just a little. Xander's hands were on Spike's back, pressing and kneading the muscles, one slipping lower to curve around a narrow hip.

Spike's eyes were closed, his dark lashes fanned out on porcelain cheeks. Xander's were squeezed shut, as if he was trying to push his thoughts and feelings into the vampire's mind through sheer force. Willow saw Spike's eyes flutter open, and the vampire's brow creased when he saw the intense expression on his lover's face. He pulled back, and broke the kiss with some difficulty. As their lips parted, Xander bent his head and began kissing and sucking at Spike's neck, while the vampire stroked the back of his head soothingly. Spike's eyes met Willow's. "Guest room's the second door on the left upstairs, Red," he said, "I'm gonna take him on up." She smiled and nodded, then walked into the living room to watch TV and give them some privacy. Spike turned Xander around enough to get him to walk, and led him upstairs.

Spike closed the door of the master bedroom behind them. Xander had walked a couple of steps into the room, and stood looking around. The room was not

what he expected. It was decorated in light neutral colors: predominantly cream, white and tan. The furniture was light wood, a sitting area in the large suite held two chairs and a loveseat upholstered in cream, strewn with sage green pillows. The bed was a huge expanse of white and cream, with lots of pillows and a soft down comforter. Wooden blinds covered the room's windows, and Xander could see blackout shades behind the blinds. The bed had a library headboard that was filled with an assortment of books, a desk in the corner held more books. The floor was hardwood covered by a faded oriental rug that picked up the sage and tan colors elsewhere in the room. It was beautiful, soothing and wholly unlike Xander's perception of what Spike's bedroom would be.

Cool arms slipped around his waist, and Xander leaned back against his lover. "I like your room," he said, "It's nice." Spike hugged him and kissed his neck. "Thanks, luv." Xander turned in his arms and kissed him very lightly. Their lips brushed together gently, then more insistently. When Spike moaned, Xander slipped his tongue into his mouth and explored, tasting the inside of his lips, and then running it over his teeth and up against the roof of his mouth. Spike's tongue came forward to slide against Xander's, and he sucked at it, earning a hiss.

Spike broke the kiss and reached down to tug the hem of Xander's thin sweater from his jeans and pull it over his head. Xander kicked off his shoes and bent to take off his socks. As he straightened, the vampire reached out and unbuttoned his jeans, then eased the zipper down. Xander shimmied his hips and the jeans fell to puddle at his feet, leaving him completely naked. He

raised his hands and let them rest lightly on Spike's hips as they kissed softly again. Spike moved back a step to look at his lover. He took in every inch. His gaze started at tanned bare feet; it climbed up muscular calves strewn with curling dark hairs to strong thighs that cradled Xander's jutting erection. With his eyes, Spike traced the curved lines of Xander's hips and every dip and swell of his defined abdomen and chest. Finally, he looked at his lover's tanned throat and up to his face. He couldn't decide which was sexier; the complete lack of shyness or embarrassment or the frankly sexual light in Xander's chocolate eyes. Placing one hand on the center of Xander's chest, he said, "Go sit on the bed, luv."

The dark man did as he was asked, settling himself against a pile of pillows on top of the covers. He tucked one hand behind his head and left the other one comfortably on his abdomen. He sprawled slightly, leaving his legs splayed open as his hand lazily traced the muscles of his midriff. Spike felt the front of his jeans becoming damp as his cock leaked at the wanton sight before him. He turned off the overhead light and walked to the window. He opened the shutters and rolled the shade up, allowing silvery moonlight to spill into the room. Its glow cast a faintly blue light on the room. Spike stood in the shaft of moonlight. He dropped his duster from his shoulders, catching it before it hit the floor and tossing it over the desk chair.

He lifted one foot to the bedside table and propped it there to unlace his boot. He removed it and his sock, and then repeated the process with the other foot. He unbuttoned his red shirt, and eased it down his arms slowly. Once it was off, he pulled his black tee shirt off

over his head. He reached down and unbuttoned the top button of his jeans, then stopped and looked at the bed. "You're so beautiful in the moonlight, Xan," he said, his voice rough with passion. "The only place you look better is in the sunlight." Xander smiled at his lover and gestured for him to continue taking off his jeans. Spike unbuttoned each button slowly and deliberately, and then eased the tight jeans over his hips and down his legs. After stepping out of the jeans, he stood and smiled. "Either way, you look good in my bed." His tone was warm and possessive. "I promise you, luv, when this is all over I'm going to keep you right where you are for a solid week." He bit back a moan when he saw Xander's whiskey-colored eyes darken to ebony and his cock twitch against his flat belly.

Spike walked to the edge of the bed. He groaned when Xander reached out and drew a finger from the base of his cock to the tip, slowly tracing a line of fire. The finger eased around the head, then slid back down, tracing the prominent vein. The single finger was joined by the rest of Xander's hand, slipping beneath Spike's balls to cup and squeeze, then to slide delicately across the sensitive strip of skin behind them. Spike's knees quaked at the sensations, and then faltered altogether as Xander leaned forward to repeat the motions of his hand with his mouth. "Holy Shit, Xan, so hot – you feel so fucking good," the vampire panted, and then yelped as his entire cock was engulfed in wet heat with one swift move. Xander bobbed his head, sliding Spike's cock in and out, trailing his tongue along the underside and scraping lightly with his teeth.

He pulled all the way back and stopped, with the leaking crown just resting against his lips, and looked up into Spike's eyes. "I love hearing you talk, Will. I love the things you say. You make me crazy. Tell me," he said, letting his lips brush against his lover's cock with each word. "Tell ... tell you what?" Spike rasped, his hands clutching on Xander's shoulders. He could see the fluid that dripped from his cock shining on Xander's lips, and the sight made nearly made him come on the spot. "Anything, everything," Xander replied, then drew back and deep-throated Spike as far as he could. Spike's mind went blank. There was no way in hell he was going to be able to speak. Not when he could feel the head of his dick pressing against the edge of Xander's tight throat. Especially not if he swallowed against it, which he did. Broken noises fell from the vampire's lips, and he clutched Xander harder to stop himself from thrusting.

Xander pulled back again, laughing. "Care to repeat that in English?" he asked. Spike panted harshly and tried not to fall over. "I don't think it translates. It might have been 'gah', I think," he said. "Can I sit down before I fall down?" Xander slid over on the bed and pulled Spike down to him. He wrapped his arms around the smaller body and simultaneously rubbed his erection against Spike's hip and kissed and licked his neck. "Tell me," he demanded. Spike's hips matched Xander's rhythm, and he began speaking against his lover's neck. "I can't get enough of you, your heat. You feel so good, Xan. You make me burn. Tonight, when I saw you kill that fledge, I nearly came in my pants. You were so gorgeous, striking like a snake. I wanted to run to you and throw you over the porch rail and fuck you blind."

Xander groaned, lost in Spike's words. "Yeah," he panted, "fucking me blind – that sounds good. Can we do that now?" The vampire laughed, "Yes, love – we can do that now. The lube's in my coat pocket, wanna get it?" Xander kissed him hard, then scrambled off the bed and crossed the room to Spike's duster, hanging on the desk chair. He dug through the pocket until his hand closed on the mostly-depleted tube. Before he could turn around, one of Spike's hard hands closed on his hip, the other snatched the tube from him. "Hands on the chair back, Xan, right now." Spike's voice was low and rough. Xander swept the duster onto the floor and grabbed the back of the chair, automatically bending over and spreading his legs. He rested his forehead on the back of the chair and waited.

It was a short wait. Within seconds, he felt Spike's questing fingers slide down the crease of his ass and circle his pucker. Spike's cool lips brushed his ear, and the vampire spoke in the same rhythm as his fingers circled. "Don't think I can wait, Xan... wanna make it good for you, but I can't wait. You mind taking it a little rough?" In answer, Xander arched his back and pushed against the slick hand. "Rough's good, I can do rough," he panted, and then gasped and groaned as two fingers breached him in a fast, strong thrust. He groaned again as the fingers began to pump in and out of him. "Oh, God, Spike – so good ... want you in me – oh!" His frantic words broke off as a third finger pushed into him. He was reduced to a keening wail for four or five thrusts, and then a frustrated groan as the fingers left him altogether. "Can't wait, have to be in you, can't wait, God – you're so hot inside, burning me, can't wait," Spike chanted as he lined himself up and pushed

inside with one long, fast stroke that left him completely buried in the human's heat. Xander's barely prepared ass clenched and fluttered around the intrusion, and the vampire bit completely through his lip in an effort to hold back the orgasm that threatened to burst from him at the feel of the human's hot softness surrounding him.

For a long second, they were both completely still and silent. Regaining a thread of control, Spike pulled back, almost completely out of Xander's body, and slammed himself back in hard enough to lift the taller man up onto his toes. Xander shouted, Spike snarled. Spike set a brutal pace, fucking Xander as hard and as fast as he possibly could, demon to the fore. Xander felt the hardness of Spike's ridged face against his back, and Spike's fingers digging into his hips. His own cock was crushed between his body and the back of the chair, but he didn't care. The raw, primal energy of their coupling had transported him beyond pain. All he could do was feel, caught up in a maelstrom of sensation and Spike's cock filling him over and over again with stretching, burning, aching pleasure. He felt himself coming without having even touched himself, shooting against the back of the chair and his own stomach and chest, and knew he was making animal noises, gasping and crying out his release.

Still Spike's pace did not slow, as he pistoned in and out of Xander's hot channel over and over. He smelled blood, but could tell that it wasn't much, and he could smell no fear on his lover, only lust and excitement. He smelled the sharp scent of Xander's come, and reached around to rub the human's stomach, coating his hand in the slippery mess. He dropped his hand to Xander's

still-hard cock and began to pump it in time with his thrusts. Xander's head raised up from the chair back as his back arched. "Spike," he moaned, "bite me." The vampire's rhythm faltered a little and he asked, "Are you sure, love?" Xander's head bent back further and he said, "Fuck, yes." Spike clamped his hands down harder, one on Xander's hip, the other around his cock, and he thrust strongly into his lover. As soon as he could tell that they were both close to orgasm, he curled himself forward over Xander's body and sank his fangs into the almost-healed spot he'd bitten before. He snarled into Xander's neck, sucking his blood and flooding his ass at the same time. Xander felt himself coming again, splashing the chair, Spike's hand and himself. He heard someone screaming, "Fuck, yes!" and only vaguely registered that it was him.

Xander slowly uncurled his aching hands from the back of the chair and pushed them both back a step. He fell to his knees, taking Spike with him, their bodies still linked by Spike's cock. They knelt on the floor, panting for long moments. Spike slipped out of Xander's body with a small moan and laid his head on the human's back. He rested his hand on his lover's thigh. "You OK, Xan? I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asked. Xander laughed weakly. "I'm good, baby - but I think your chair is shot. Shower now?" he asked hopefully. "God, yes," the vampire replied, struggling to his feet. He pulled Xander up and wrapped his arms around him, kissing him gently on the cheek, then turning and leading him to the shower.

Halfway through getting cleaned up, Xander remembered Willow. Unfortunately, he was rinsing the soap off of his face at the time and inhaled water when

his mouth dropped open in shock. Spike pounded him on the back until he stopped choking, and then asked him what the matter was. "Crap, Will – Willow is downstairs. I know she heard us," he muttered. "People in other states heard us, Xan – you were howling at one point," Spike informed him. "Oh, yeah – that," Xander said with a shrug and a broad grin. They finished their shower in silence, and then returned to the bedroom. "We better go tell her it's safe to come up to bed," Spike said. They both pulled on sleep pants and tee shirts and headed downstairs hand in hand. They found Willow asleep on the sofa fully dressed.

Xander bent down and shook her, pulling her into a sitting position. She leaned against him and opened one eye blearily. "You guys fuck loud," she accused in a slurred voice. Xander kissed her forehead, "Yes, we do, sorry – we can't help it." He stood up and started walking her toward the stairs, Spike trailing behind them with their bags from the foyer. They took her to her room, and then went back to the master bedroom. Xander looked at the back of the desk chair ruefully, and then just hung a towel over the mess. He also stopped to pull the shade and close the blinds over the window.

They had just settled back into bed when they heard a soft knock at the door. "Come in," Spike called. The door opened a crack, and a pajama-clad Willow poked her head around it. "Are you guys naked under there?" she asked. Both men shook their heads. "Was the loud fucking on the bed?" she asked. Again, both men shook their heads. Her expression changed to the dreaded puppy-eyes. "Can I sleep with you, then?" she wheedled in a little-girl voice. Both men nodded, and

she flew across the room to the bed. Xander lifted up a corner of the blanket and found himself crawled over by Willow, who settled happily between the two men, snuggling down into the pillows. Spike and Xander leaned in and kissed over her tousled head, and then each pressed a kiss to it. They each stretched an arm across the pillows above her head and intertwined their fingers. "I love you guys," Willow mumbled sleepily. Spike and Xander's eyes met in the gloom, as they both whispered, "Love you."

Part Thirty

Sometime during the night, Xander had begun to thrash from side to side on the bed in the throes of a nightmare. Spike had awakened to Willow pressing back against him in her sleep, instinctively trying to move away from Xander. The vampire easily swept her up and over his body, depositing her on the far side of the bed, where she settled quietly. Sliding to the center of the bed, he gathered Xander's body to him and wrapped the struggling mortal in his arms, crooning wordlessly and touching him gently until he calmed and fell back asleep.

To his surprise, Spike was the first to awaken again. He could tell that it was late afternoon. He was curled on his side with Xander in front of him and Willow behind, and he couldn't remember ever feeling so deliciously warm. Spike's arm draped over Xander's side, and their hands were clasped against his chest. Spike's face was

nestled between his lover's shoulder blades. One of the vampire's knees was drawn up to curve along Xander's backside. The other leg was bent slightly back toward Willow, she had both of her feet curled around his ankle. Her arm was draped over his hip, and her front was pressed tightly to his back. The side of her face rested against the back of his neck and her soft breath tickled the fine hairs there. Spike mused to himself that there was no force on earth that could encourage him to move from this lovely, warm nest.

Spike could hear Xander waking; his heartbeat quickened and his circulation sped up slightly. Stretching, the human turned onto his back and gathered both Spike and Willow to him, sliding his arm under them and curling his hand over Willow's shoulder. He brought his other hand up to trace the contours of Spike's face, running his finger across sharp cheekbones and lush lips. Willow began to stir, and she braced a palm on Spike's back and pushed. Getting the hint, Spike rolled across Xander's body to vacate his spot and move into the corresponding position on the other side. Willow sighed in contentment and snuggled against her best friend's chest. Xander kissed Spike on the forehead and nuzzled at his spiky hair. The vampire tilted his face up, silently demanding a kiss, which Xander was happy to supply. The human then carefully extricated himself from the others, pointing at the bathroom when Spike looked askance at him. When he returned, Spike and Willow were curled tightly together in the center of the bed, asleep. Xander smiled softly at them and went downstairs.

As he suspected, the smell of cooking bacon could not

be ignored. Before breakfast was halfway cooked, Xander found himself fending off attacks on the large skillet full of fatty pork goodness. Willow and Spike both got smacked a couple of times with the spatula before they promised to be good and busied themselves making toast, pouring juice and coffee and heating blood. Xander slid plates of bacon and eggs onto the table and the three ate in companionable silence. After breakfast was done, Spike and Xander cleaned the kitchen while Willow called the Summers' house to check in. As she walked back into the kitchen, she was greeted with the sight of Xander sitting in one of the dining chairs with Spike straddling his lap. She crossed the threshold just in time to see the vampire place a sweet kiss on the end of the human's nose. She grinned broadly and said, "Awwwww!" Spike buried his head on Xander's shoulder, as he patted the blond head and said, "There, there, Nancy." Spike punched him in the shoulder and stuck his tongue out at Willow. The vampire yelped in surprise when Xander stood quickly, still holding him. The yelp turned into a growl as Xander loosened his hold and allowed Spike to slide down his body until his bare feet touched the floor. Xander returned the growl and kissed his lover thoroughly, then turned him toward the door and gave him a shove in the general direction of the shower.

They trooped into the living room, and Willow reminded them that they were to be at the Summers' house an hour after sundown. "Well," Xander said, smiling grimly, "we better get moving." They went upstairs and quickly got ready. Spike and Xander went to the basement and retrieved a number of weapons, while Willow checked her magic supplies and packed them into a small satchel. They loaded everything into

Xander's Mercedes and left just after sunset. Within ten minutes, they were at a florist's shop. Willow got a dozen calla lilies; Spike and Xander again chose mixed roses, this time pink and yellow. None of them spoke until the car was parked at the cemetery. "Well, let's go," Willow said with determination. As soon as they were all out of the car, she stepped between the two men and linked an arm with each of them. They exchanged a look, acknowledging that they could both feel the petite witch trembling.

As they approached the grave, the men stopped and allowed Willow to cross the last ten feet to the headstone alone. They each turned to face outward, guarding her. After all, a Sunnydale cemetery after dark wasn't the safest place in the world. Willow knelt in front of Tara's marker, and replaced the faded lilies in the vase with fresh ones. She rummaged in her bag for a bottle of water and filled the vase. "Hey, Baby," she whispered, "I've missed you." She stroked her hand along the soft grass that grew over the grave, wishing that she were touching her lover's smooth cheek. Reaching again into her bag, Willow removed some herbs and powders, which she crushed in her hands and sprinkled over the grave. She whispered a few short phrases in Latin and made several hand gestures, then laid her hands flat in the grass again. Within a couple of minutes, she felt a soft breeze on her face and smelled a sweet scent. A brilliant smile lighted her tear-stained face.

Willow looked up as Spike and Xander stepped up to flank her. Xander placed the roses on the grave and dropped a hand to rest on the top of Willow's head. The soft breeze stirred again. "Honeysuckle," Spike said,

"Why do I smell honeysuckle?" He looked down at Willow, who raised her eyes to meet his. "That's Tara's scent – her spirit is here," she said, with wonder in her voice. His eyes widened in surprise and a soft smile curved his lips. Xander whispered, "Hey, Tara," and sank down next to Willow and wrapped an arm around her. They stayed for a few moments, and then got ready to leave, clearing away the old flowers. Willow reached into her bag one last time and pulled out a completely smooth, palm sized river rock. She passed her hand over it and muttered an incantation before laying it on top of Tara's headstone. As they turned to go, Xander looked at the rock and ran his finger across the word "always" that was carved across it.

Part Thirty-One

Xander's butt was getting numb. He'd been sitting on the back steps of the Summers house for three hours, and he was still sore from the exertions of the night before. He shook his head to dispel the vivid memories, not wanting to lose focus. Spike, Angel, Buffy and three potentials were combing the nearby streets and woods, circling back to the house every so often to check in with Xander. There had been no sign of Dru or any other nasties. They had all long since burned through any adrenaline or excitement, and everyone was tense from the fruitless waiting. Xander stood and stretched. He walked up the stairs and into the kitchen, where Dawn was sitting at the table with Willow, drinking coffee. "No luck?" the witch asked. "Fuck, no," Xander sighed, leaning against the wall dejectedly.

"I think this patrol is a bust," Dawn said. She picked up the phone and called Buffy's cell, telling her to gather the others and come back to the house. They were all

perplexed and disappointed by Drusilla's absence. They'd plotted and planned and prepared, all on the assumption that their target would have the decency to show up, and they were all more than a little edgy. Dawn's snappishness had finally encouraged Jase to take Sara into the den to watch a video, and the only reason she and Willow were able to sit together was that they'd called a silent truce when they realized that not only were they getting on each other's nerves, they were getting on their own nerves.

The back door flew open and bounced off the wall behind it. Spike stalked in with a murderous look on his face, and then turned and shouted back out the door, "Would you two just shut the fuck up already? One more soddin' word and I swear I'll kill you both!" He whirled and went to stare moodily into the refrigerator, looking for a beer. Angel and Buffy came in the door with abashed looks on their faces. They were shooting each other dirty looks, and Xander could tell that Spike had cut them off in the middle of an argument. Xander spent a few minutes pondering the safest course of action, and decided that sliding down to the floor to sit quietly was his best option. Spike finished glaring at the food and joined him on the floor, handing him a beer with a sigh. Buffy and Angel sat at the remaining seats at the kitchen table and exchanged foul looks. Willow and Dawn looked deeply into their coffee cups.

The heavy silence of the room was broken when Jase stuck his head in the door. "Dawn, I'm going to take Sara to the store and get some ice cream. Where are the keys?" Dawn looked up with a cross expression on her face, then sighed and ran a hand through her hair. She stood and walked to the door, digging the keys to

the SUV out of her jeans pocket. She pressed them into her husband's hand and kissed him lightly on the lips. "I'm sorry I was so bitchy, honey. We're all on edge. Will you get a whole shitload of ice cream? And maybe some cookies?" He rubbed his hand over her hair and smiled at her, nodding. Spike drained his beer and pushed up off the floor. "I'll go with you – no telling what's out there." He strode toward the door, then turned back to Xander and pulled him to his feet. The vampire kissed him gently. "We'll be back soon, then we'll figure this whole mess out, OK, luv?" Xander smiled and nodded, and Spike followed Jase out the door. Xander took a seat at the table and looked around at all of his friends. "This sucks," he said.

Spike settled into the passenger seat of the SUV and buckled his seatbelt. Jase started the engine and eased out of the driveway. He glanced over at the vampire. "How are you holding up, Will?" he asked. Spike snorted. "Well, mate, I'd be a damn sight better if I could kill something." Jase nodded. "I can understand that." They drove in silence for a few moments, and then Jase cleared his throat and spoke hesitantly. "Will, if you don't mind my asking, why is Dru after Xander? Is there some backstory that I don't know?" Spike thought for a moment, and then began speaking. "Dru wants him because she wants him – because the stars told her to, or her dollies like him, or any number of insane reasons – doesn't really matter. What matters is that she's trying to follow Angelus' old system, whereby she will stalk him, destroy everyone and everything he loves, drive him insane, and then turn him."

"So, I'm right in being pretty glad I never met Angelus, huh?" Jase asked. "That you are," Spike agreed. "I just want this to be over," he sighed. "I just want Xan to be free of all of this." They stopped at a red light, and Jase turned to face Spike. "Once he's free, what happens?" he asked gently. Spike looked at him, and was struck by the similarities between Jase and William – it was almost like looking in a mirror, he thought. "Well, in my deepest, darkest nancy-boy dreams it means that Xan decides to stay here with me. I don't know if that'll happen either way. Even if it doesn't I still owe him a lot. He made me realize that I was holding back, that I was so afraid to take a chance that I was just muddling through, hiding."

Jase nodded. "I know what you mean. Dawn did that for me. When she told me about her past, I almost ran. It was a close thing. Finally, I decided that she was worth it – that I wanted to be with her no matter what; whether her life was unnaturally long or unnaturally short, or we couldn't have kids, or whatever. I decided to embrace the weirdness, and celebrate every day we had together. That was the day she made me free." The light turned green, and Jase drove on, smiling a little at the sight of a Master Vampire staring at him with his mouth hanging open, and then shutting it with a snap. They pulled into a parking space in front of the grocery store and Jase turned the engine off. As Jase's hand closed on the door handle Spike's closed on his shoulder. He turned to see the vampire smiling brilliantly at him. "You know, Jase, I always used to say that I was love's bitch – I think you might be love's bitch, too." From the back seat, Sara spoke up. "Love's bitch," she trilled, and both men groaned.

They couldn't decide which flavor of Ben & Jerry's was the most appropriate for the situation, so they just got one of each flavor. They stepped out of the market, Spike had Sara in his arms and Jase had four plastic bags full of pint containers looped over his wrists. They were laughing at Sara's antics when the first fledgling rushed them. Spike pushed Sara into Jase's arms and whirled, sweeping the hapless vampire's feet out from under him. Seconds after its back hit the asphalt, it was dusting under Spike's stake. He turned to check on Jase and Sara, and was dismayed to see Jase being held by two more fledges, Sara screaming in his arms.

"Hello, my bad doggie." Spike stiffened at the sound of her voice. It still sounded like water flowing – sweet and delicate, with an undercurrent of power. Drusilla stepped into the circle of brightness cast by the overhead lights. She walked up to Spike and cupped his chin in her hand, looking into his eyes. Hers were dark and remarkably clear, and Spike felt his stomach drop. He ruthlessly crushed the fear down and stared back at her, one hand rising to flick her fingers off his face. "Not your doggie, Dru. Not anymore," he said, his voice tight. She clasped her hands in front of her and smiled. "No," she said, "not my doggie." She tilted her head and looked at him quizzically. "All the hardware has come out and your demon is free, except for that pesky soul, eh, Spike? Must be cramping your style something awful." He gave her a grim smile. "My style is none of your concern. Tell your pet to let my friend go. Now." His tone brooked no argument.

Drusilla turned toward Jase, and Spike wanted to stake himself for drawing her attention to the human and his child. Drusilla sauntered over to Jase and looked

closely at him, grabbing his chin when he tried to turn away. She looked back at Spike with wonder in her eyes. "Oh, Spike! Look at him – he's just like William. He's everything you were so long ago. Beautiful and innocent and alive." She clapped her hands gleefully. "Oh, I must have him! I can make a new Spike, one who won't be taken from me. No, Daddy cannot have this one – he'll be all mine. And look at this," her gaze turned from Jase to Sara. "A little one, so fresh and pretty. I'm sure she'll be delicious." At her predatory glare Jase hugged Sara tighter to him.

Fury swept through Spike and he changed into game face. He grabbed Drusilla by the shoulder and threw her backward. Before the two fledges could react, their dust was settling on the ground. Spike grabbed Jase's shoulder and spun him toward the car. "Go! Get Sara home, now!" Jase took off for the car as the vampire whirled to intercept Drusilla as she bore down on them. Glancing back over his shoulder one last time he saw Spike crumple to the ground as Drusilla tazered him.

Drusilla stood over Spike for a moment, and then gave him another blast from the tazer as a precaution. She looked off into the darkness. "Come along, dear one, we have a new toy," she called. A broad-shouldered man stepped from the shadows and hoisted Spike in a fireman's carry. Drusilla leaned up to kiss him, and his fangs tore into her lips. She moaned, and they both licked the blood from their mouths as they parted. "You're a naughty boy," she chided, as they walked into the darkness.

Jase ran into the house still clutching Sara to him, the forgotten grocery bags of ice cream still hanging off of

his arms. At the sight of his dusty, tear-streaked face Dawn shot up from the table. "Oh my God," she cried, "what is it, Jase?" He reached out and pulled her close, so that their bodies were wrapped around their daughter's. Jase's eyes met Xander's over Dawn's head. "Oh, God, Xander, I'm so sorry – Dru's got Will."

Part Thirty-Two

Xander was on his knees in the middle of Spike's bedroom. He inhaled and exhaled deeply, searching for the soothing rhythm that would allow him to sink into meditation and quiet his screaming mind. After Jase's arrival, Xander, Buffy and Angel had torn out of the Summers' house, searching for Spike. They'd wandered Sunnydale, relying on Angel's inherent sense of his childer to lead them to Dru's lair. Unfortunately, the rising sun had chased them away before they had any clear idea of her location. Dawn had insisted that they get some rest while she sent teams of potentials out to search in the daylight. Cordelia, Brooks and Oz had arrived shortly after daybreak, and Oz and Willow had driven an exhausted Xander back to Spike's Victorian. Xander had stumbled into the bedroom and dropped to the floor, seeking peace the only way he knew how. Finally, he gave up and rose to his feet long enough to propel his body onto the bed. Once there, he gathered Spike's pillow in his arms and allowed the tears to fall.

Across town, Spike hung limply from the chains that had been used to bind him to the wall of the

warehouse. Bugging fuck, he thought, how do I get myself into this shit? Go to the store; protect Jase – it all sounded so simple. What a cosmic joke. The blazing headache from the tazer jolts was much too reminiscent of the pain from the unlamented fucking chip, and he was not in the mood for Drusilla and her newest childe. Her childe – bugging fuck again – only Drusilla would be insane enough to do what she apparently had done. Spike muttered a curse as his “little brother” entered the room. Riley fucking Finn – a vampire; FarmVamp. Jesus Christ. In his human face, Riley looked exactly like the bland, angsty prig who had stabbed Spike in the chest with a simulated wood-grain plastic stake so many years ago.

Awakening in chains with a splitting headache, just to have this wanker beat the shit out of him was not exactly Spike’s fondest memory to date. It seemed like little brother had some pent-up anger that he’d needed to work out, and Spike’s battered face and body bore testament to it. The son of a bitch was strong, and his military training gave him very precise, very painful insight in just how to cause the most damage. Spike had listened grimly as several of his ribs had broken under Riley’s fists, along with his nose and a couple of his fingers.

Riley stood at the back of the room and looked at Spike eagerly. Spike lifted his head. “What’s the matter, Soldier Boy? Can’t have any fun without orders from Mummy?” he taunted. Riley growled, but did not advance. Spike spit some blood out onto the floor and laughed harshly. “Are you the best she could do?” he asked. Riley vamped out and launched himself toward Spike. He stopped in his tracks when Dru stepped out

of the shadows and barked, "No!" at him. She crossed her arms under her breasts and slowly walked toward Spike. Once she reached him, she lifted one hand to run her fingers over his bruised and swollen face. Dropping her hand from his lips, she stepped closer and tilted her head, bringing her neck to Spike's mouth. She whispered into his ear, "Drink, childe. I don't wish to look at you like this. Drink and be pretty for me, darling Spike."

He turned his face away, and found her hand in his hair, wrenching his head around with unexpected strength. She shook his head sharply and pulled him back to her neck. "Do as I say, Spike. I haven't time for your little games. You will find that I have learned how to deal with insolence since last we met." Spike lifted his head and looked at Riley, who looked at the ground. He looked so much like a chastened puppy that Spike had to laugh. "Swat you on the nose with a rolled up newspaper, did she, Farm Boy?" he taunted, and found his head shaken roughly again for his trouble. "Ow! Dru," he said mildly, "I've a bit of a headache if you don't mind." She tugged his hair again. Well, bugging fuck again, Spike thought, might as well. The sire's blood would heal him, and he wasn't exactly in fighting form as he was. He slid into game face and ripped into Drusilla's throat with neither finesse nor care.

Her blood was hot and strong, and the taste exploded on his tongue with raw power. Spike moaned unconsciously into the torn flesh of her neck, drawing as hard as he could. Drusilla moaned in answer and pressed herself against his body, maneuvering her legs to straddle one of his, thrusting against his knee. He

angled his hips, trying to get some friction on his instantly hard cock, but she was lost in her own pleasure. Spike heard her scream and felt her shudder against him. She leaned heavily on his body for a moment, and then pulled away, laughing.

Spike stared at her for a moment, stunned, then licked the blood off of his lips and smiled at her. He could feel his cuts closing and his ribs and nose knitting. He could also hear Riley growling and whining behind Drusilla. "Thanks, baby – I needed that," he smirked, "was it good for you?" Another growl emanated from Riley. Spike threw him a sardonic look. "Do fuck off, puppy – the grownups need some alone time." He brought his eyes back to Dru's. "Come on, luv, let's save the chains for another time. Let me loose and we can finish this little game." He cocked his leg lewdly to emphasize his erection and leered at her. She closed the distance between them and pressed her hand against his hardness, rubbing him roughly through his jeans.

"You'd like me to believe it, wouldn't you, Spike?" she hissed. "You'd like for me to fall for your lies and right back into your open arms, yes?" She squeezed his erection painfully, smiling when a gasp was wrenched from his lips. She did it again, and he groaned in pain. "Not likely, Spike. His scent is all over you. I'll not forgive your indiscretion easily." She released him and stepped back, smiling as he sagged against the chains. Riley stepped up behind Drusilla and wrapped his arms around her waist. He smiled at Spike over her shoulder and moaned as her hand slid behind her back and between his legs. Spike continued to look at the floor as Riley swept Dru into his arms and carried her to some other part of the warehouse. Shag her good,

mate, he thought, I'm going to need some time to get out of these chains.

Xander, Willow, Oz, Cordelia, Brooks, Angel and Buffy sat in the living room at the Summers' house and waited for the sun to set. The potentials had spent the day searching and had determined the locations of a couple of warehouses that could be Drusilla's lair. Once the sun was down Xander, Willow, Buffy and Angel would head for the most likely site; the potentials were already staking out the other. Cordelia, Brooks and Oz would stay at the house to guard Jase and Sara, with a group of potentials to give extra muscle.

Xander and Angel sat side by side on the couch with matching scowls. Periodically, they would exchange a few quiet words, but they did not speak to anyone else. Willow confided to Buffy that Xander hadn't spoken more than five words to Oz and herself as they'd gotten ready and on the trip over. Buffy told her that Angel had been much the same. Each man was lost in his own thoughts of Spike.

Finally, darkness fell. Xander and Angel rose from their seats and strode to the door, weapons at the ready. Buffy and Willow followed.

Spike was free of the chains. He'd had to dislocate both thumbs to get loose, but the pain was worth it. The sire's blood he'd drunk would mend the thumbs quickly enough. He took a moment to look around the warehouse. There were three fledglings in a front room, playing cards and bullshitting. Two more lingered by the back door. Dru and Riley were still going at it in an interior room; Spike could hear the shrieks and moans. It sounded like Riley was doing most of the shrieking.

Seeing no easy way out of the warehouse, Spike found a chair and sat down, propping his feet on a convenient pile of junk from which he extracted several stake-sized slivers of wood. With his back to the wall and a makeshift weapon stowed in each boot, he waited.

Eventually, a battered and bleeding Riley limped into the main part of the warehouse. Spike could see the long welts that were already closing on the beefy vampire's back. Sex with Drusilla had always involved much blood, both spilled and drunk, so Spike knew that the other man's strength would not be much diminished. Spike laughed out loud at the dumbfounded expression on Riley's face as he looked at the empty chains and scratched his head. "You really aren't very bright, are you, G.I. Joe?" Spike's voice was low. Riley spun around and growled at him. Spike carefully stood, flexing his hands to make sure his thumbs were healed. They were. He leaned against the wall in a casual pose.

"So, mate," he began conversationally, "how'd she get ahold of you?" Riley glanced back at the door through which he'd entered the room, and then shrugged. He

crossed the floor to stand about ten feet from Spike and also leaned on the wall, mimicking the older vampire's stance. "She got us in South America. Our squad was clearing out a nest of hostiles. It turned out to be her nest. She had a bunch of minions and some demons. There was one big Chaos demon that was her mate. I killed him." Riley looked smug as he recounted the story. "Bet she appreciated that," Spike said.

Riley snorted. "No, she did not appreciate that. She went berserk. She killed most of the squad and turned me." Spike looked the other vampire over. "Seems like you came out OK, mate," he observed. Riley grinned evilly. "Well, once I woke up, I had a new perspective on things." They looked at each other in silence for a moment. "So, whatever happened with you and Buffy?" Riley asked. Spike grimaced. "Broke up. You know how those things are – summer fling and whatnot. How's the wife?" Riley grinned again. "She was delicious. How did the soul come about?"

"I took a little trip to Africa. You pick up the oddest things when you travel." Spike's voice was flat. "You've trained Dru." It was not a question. Riley laughed. "Yeah, had to. She was fucking nuts. She's adaptable, though. I'm pleased with her progress." His voice was brave, but Spike noticed that Riley glanced behind himself as he spoke. "I see she's trained you, too," Spike said.

Riley's eyes hardened to ice and he straightened. "When did you start fucking Harris?" he asked. Spike also straightened. "Just this week, as a matter of fact. I intend to continue doing so for quite some time," he answered. Riley began to circle Spike slowly. Spike

turned with him, keeping the other man facing him. "You'll like him better once Dru turns him," he hissed. "The improvement in stamina alone is worth the loss of the body heat." Spike pushed his sudden rage away and forced himself to stay loose. "Luckily, that's not a problem for my boy," he smirked.

The two vampires continued circling one another, and Spike suddenly realized that the strange sensation he was feeling at the back of his neck was his awareness of Angel. Angel was near. If Angel were nearby, Buffy and Xander would undoubtedly be with him. He decided he'd better speed things up a bit. "So, Captain Cardboard," he said, slowly closing the distance between them on each circle, "you asked about the soul. That was kind of your fault, actually." Riley gave him a disbelieving look. "True," Spike asserted. "Just after you left, Buffy decided she was through with me. I heard about a demon in Africa who could make me what I was, so I decided to become a better man for her." He laughed bitterly.

Without warning, Spike stopped circling and lashed out at Riley, catching him with an uppercut to the jaw. Riley reacted, and the two spun across the warehouse floor, throwing punches. Despite his military training and size advantage, Riley was the weaker fighter. He landed a couple of blows, but was dangerously outclassed. Spike continued talking as he heaped damage onto Riley. "Being a better man for Buffy? That didn't quite work out to plan." Each word was punctuated with a punch to Riley's already-battered face. "Turns out I wasn't the vampire she wanted. She went back to Angel, and I went insane." Spike kicked Riley between the legs as hard as he could.

Riley dropped to his knees, cradling his damaged balls with both hands. Spike grabbed him by the hair and savagely pulled his head back. He looked into the other vampire's pain-filled eyes. "I found insanity, as a lifestyle choice, to be vastly overrated. But I guess you know that, having spent quality time with Dru. Don't," he said, when Riley's mouth opened to call for her. "The point of my story – and I do have one," he said, "is this. I was crazy for a bit, but I got better. And then I realized that having a soul wasn't a curse. Then, recently, I found out that it's actually a blessing. Because I have a soul, I get to have friends who love me. And I get to have Xander, who will." Riley opened his mouth as if to contradict Spike, who used his hand in the other vampire's hair to shake his head violently. "Don't interrupt your elders," he admonished, "it's rude." Riley's mouth closed again.

"So, I guess what I'm trying to say is thank you," Spike continued. "If my having a soul is your fault, then I owe you some gratitude. So, thanks." Spike loosened his hold on Riley's hair, and the other man took the opportunity to surge to his feet and launch himself at Spike. Whereupon he immediately found himself impaled on the sharp piece of wood that Spike had pulled from his boot and held in front of his chest. Spike had to laugh at the cow-eyed look of surprise on Riley's face as he dusted. Spike tossed the sliver of wood away and brushed Riley's dust from his hands as he turned. Which also happened to be the exact same moment that Drusilla attacked him.

She came out of nowhere, swiftly and silently. Spike was stunned by a hard kick to the face. He could feel

his recently healed nose break again with a gush of blood down his throat. He rocked back on his heels, but did not fall. He jumped backward, and when Drusilla rushed him again, he swept her feet out from under her. She went down hard, but was back upright instantly. Spike wiped blood from his face and casually flicked it on the floor at her feet. "That hurt," he said mildly. Her eyes were huge and bright in her pale face, and she was shaking with rage. Her voice rose in pitch as she moved closer, aggressively invading Spike's personal space, stopping with her nose barely an inch from his bloodied one.

"You idiot! You killed him!" she shrieked. "He was mine and you killed him. We were going to be a family – just my three boys and me. You were to be my perfect loves – and you killed him!" Spike looked her in the eye for a moment, then placed both hands on her chest and shoved her. He was surprised when she only moved back a step – he'd expected to throw her across the room. "You made him, Dru, and you're calling me an idiot? I'm pretty insulted by that – ow!" he yelled when she reached out and dragged her sharp nails down the side of his face, leaving behind four bloody gouges from the corner of his eye to his jaw.

Spike retreated a step and leaned down lightning fast to pull a stake from his boot. Even faster, she stepped forward and snapped his wrist, handily palming the stake and turning it toward him. Cradling his broken wrist – oh, fuck, he thought, when he saw the bones sticking through the skin – he backed away from her. She lunged at him just as Buffy and Angel burst through the front door of the warehouse and the back door exploded under the force of Willow's spell. Spike

turned slightly to look past the petite witch, trying to catch a glimpse of Xander. As he turned, Dru plunged the stake into his shoulder, driving him to his knees. As he fell, Spike heard Xander shout, "Will!" Drusilla kicked Spike savagely in the head and smiled when he fell onto his already broken wrist.

Buffy dusted the second of her three fledglings easily and gestured for Angel to help Spike. At the same time, Willow yelled something in Latin that caused the two fledges at the back of the warehouse to glow brightly for a second and then disappear. Seeing this, Xander turned toward Spike and Dru at a dead run. Angel tackled her from the other side as Xander slid to a stop on his knees in front of his lover. He gently turned Spike over and tried to straighten the horribly bent wrist. The sliver of wood was still lodged in the vampire's shoulder, and his face and nose were bleeding freely; he was barely conscious. Xander looked into his eyes, and Spike tried to grin. "Get that fuckin' thing out of my arm, would ya, Xan?" he asked weakly. Xander grasped the stake and pulled it out. Spike groaned.

Xander looked up as Willow and Buffy joined them. Angel had Dru facedown on the floor, and was holding her down with a knee solidly planted in her back. Willow walked over to them and exchanged a few words with Angel. At his nod, the witch spoke a spell and gestured toward Dru with a spiraling motion of her hand. Glowing ropes of energy encircled the female vampire, and she levitated off the floor, caught in Willow's binding spell. "I can hold her for a bit," Willow gritted out, "but not forever – help Spike." Angel turned back to Xander and Spike, and his mouth fell

open as he watched Buffy use the dagger from her boot to slice Xander's wrist. The human pressed the oozing cut to Spike's lips.

Spike drank for a moment, and then pulled away. When he did, Xander and Buffy changed places, and he took the knife to slash her wrist. Spike's eyes flew to Xander's. "Drink it, Will," he said. "Her blood is strong, and you need it." Spike lowered his mouth to Buffy's arm, and nearly bit her when Xander took advantage of his distraction to pull the compound fracture in his wrist straight. The blond vampire howled as the bones aligned, but Xander was happy to see the ragged tears in his skin begin to close. Angel laid his hand on Buffy's shoulder, then slipped into gameface and used a fang to cut his own wrist, which he then offered to Spike. Spike took it and drank for a moment. He released Angel and climbed to his feet.

Spike ran his hands over his bloody face, feeling the gouges in his cheek seal, and closed his hand over his nose. With a sharp jerk, he straightened the bones, grimacing. He held a hand down to Xander and pulled the taller man to his feet. As they came face to face, Xander ran a hand through Spike's hair. "You look like shit, baby," he said with a wan smile. Spike leaned in and pressed his forehead against his lover's. His eyes closed. "I've felt better, luv," he said. Angel and Buffy climbed to their feet just as Willow said in a strained voice, "I hate to break up the reunion, but I can't hold this spell much longer." The bands of energy that held Dru were weakening, and she was howling and thrashing in rage. Xander, the two vampires and the Slayer ranged themselves in a loose circle around Dru, and Xander signaled to Willow to release the spell,

which she did with a sigh.

Dru fell to the floor in a heap, but was up in an eye-blink, swinging at Spike. He ducked, and Buffy kicked the female vampire hard in the knee. Drusilla whirled to face Buffy, and as she did, Spike and Angel each grabbed one of her arms. Using her own momentum, the two male vampires turned her body to face Xander as Buffy tossed him the stake from her pocket. Looking her straight in the eyes, Xander stepped forward and plunged it directly into her heart. As Drusilla dusted, Angel, Spike and Xander collapsed together into a heap on the floor. Buffy and Willow rushed to them.

All three men were silent. All three looked stricken. Buffy and Willow exchanged a look of alarm. Buffy pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and spoke into it briefly, while cradling Angel's head to her chest. Willow wrapped her arms around Spike and Xander, who sank against her, their free arms rising to embrace one another. That was how Dawn, Jase and Cordelia found them, fifteen minutes later. The new arrivals pulled everyone to their feet. Dawn assisted Willow; Jase and Cordelia flanked Spike and Xander, and Buffy helped Angel out to the van.

Part Thirty-Four

How are you feeling?" Xander's voice was soft; Spike could barely hear it over the roar of the shower. Xander's warm fingers were scrubbing the blood and

dust out of his hair, smoothing it over the contours of his skull with infinite gentleness. Spike shrugged. "Could ask you the same thing," he replied. Xander finished rinsing his lover's hair, and then rested his forehead between Spike's shoulder blades. "Relieved. I feel relieved. It's finally over." He turned so that his cheek rested against Spike's tense back and wrapped his arms around the vampire's narrow waist. "I'm also sorry. I don't know what to say to you. It's got to hurt to lose your sire." Spike barked a bitter laugh. "It does. Now I know how Angel felt when he had to dust Darla."

They stood in silence for long moments, and then Spike straightened and reversed their positions, bringing Xander under the shower's spray and turning him so they were face to face. The human's brown eyes closed as the water cascaded over his face. Spike took the opportunity to look at him, staring unabashedly. He wondered what the future held for them. He had been telling the truth - Dru's death did hurt him. But what hurt him more was the fear he felt in the pit of his belly - the fear that with his vendetta completed, Xander might decide to return home and leave him. Xander's eyes opened, and he looked at Spike for a moment with a sad smile. He then leaned in and kissed the vampire sweetly. They clung together until the water started to cool, and then exited the shower together.

Xander stood on one leg to dry the opposite foot. His balance faltered and Spike steadied him. "You look pale, pet," he observed. "I think I took too much blood from you back in the warehouse." Xander smiled. "I'm a little faded, but I'll be OK. I know Angel and Buffy's blood probably did more for you, but it was important to me that you have mine, too." Spike walked Xander

into the bedroom and pushed him down to sit on the bed. He used the bath towel to gently dry Xander's hair, and then knelt between the human's feet, looking up into his eyes. "That little bit of your blood did more for me than a gallon of sire's blood or Slayer's blood, Xander."

Xander smiled and raised one hand to trace over the spot on Spike's neck that he'd bitten previously. "I'm sorry my mark couldn't stay," he said wistfully. Spike's eyes widened. "You'd want it to?" Xander rubbed the spot harder, but didn't answer. He leaned down and bit the spot gently, digging his teeth in harder when Spike groaned. Xander's hand reached blindly for Spike's and brought it between the human's legs to press against his erection. "I want you," Xander hissed, and cool fingers curled around him and began to slide up and down. Spike rose to his feet and pushed his lover back on the bed, never breaking contact, and coming to rest beside him against the pillows.

Xander shifted onto his side and pulled Spike close, bringing their lengths into contact. They started to move in a gentle rhythm. Xander curled his hands into Spike's hair and brought their mouths together in a deep kiss. Their tongues moved at the same pace as their hips, and their groans and whimpers escalated. Xander pulled his lips from Spike's to drag in necessary breaths. He tilted the vampire's head to one side, pressing wet, open-mouthed kisses to the pale column of his neck, following up with tiny nips to sensitive spots.

Spike's hands roamed Xander's warm back, pressing into firm muscle and gliding across sweat-slick skin. A

million words were running through his mind; some of them even made sense. He wanted to open his mouth and pour them out, but was afraid that if he started talking he'd never stop. He wanted to tell Xander what he was feeling; to articulate and catalogue every sensation the human was causing in his body. Lust, fear, hope and love broke over him like waves each cresting and receding, pulling him between them. Finally, he gave up and let his mind drift in the maelstrom of emotions as he dragged Xander's mouth to his and crushed them together, snaking one hand between their bodies to encircle both of their erections and pump them in a rough rhythm.

Xander felt himself ready to come much too soon and broke the kiss to try and catch his breath. Spike was also close to orgasm, so he refused to let the pace slacken. When Xander started to gasp, Spike turned his head to one side, again baring his neck to his lover. Xander licked a long, wet line up the pale length and then whispered "together" into Spike's ear. Spike nodded, slipping into game face. They each bit deeply into the other's neck, pushing them over the edge into release.

Spike was careful to take only a tiny amount of blood from Xander, but let the human drink deeply from him for a moment. They lay quietly together, fingers tracing idle circles on muscled backs and through damp hair, listening to the sounds of nighttime that filtered in through the open window. Finally, Xander shifted to retrieve the towel and cleaned them both up, wiping away semen and blood. He balled up the towel and flung it toward the bathroom, then ran his fingers gently over Spike's cheekbone. The vampire turned his

face to the side and kissed the warm hand. His voice was muffled as he asked, "What's next, Xan?"

Xander turned onto his back and placed one hand behind his head. With the other hand, he drew Spike's head down onto his shoulder. "Well," he began, haltingly. "I need to ask you another favor, Will." Before he could stop it, the word "anything" slipped out of Spike's mouth. Xander hugged the slightly smaller form to him and laughed. "Don't say that until I ask – you might get yourself into trouble." Spike raised his head to smile at Xander. "That's where I stay, mate. What is it?"

"I want you to come back to Atlanta with me," he said. When Spike's eyes widened, he added, "you and Angel and Buffy. I need to fulfill a promise." At Spike's quizzical look, he explained, "I promised Shari's father that I would find the person who killed her and Lex and make them pay. I thought it only right that the three of you should come with me. I think that it will give him and her mother some peace." Spike simply nodded, then laid his head back onto Xander's shoulder.

Xander's stomach growled loudly, and Spike laughed. He rolled out of the bed, dragging Xander with him. The two men crouched naked on the floor, digging through the duffel bags they had neglected to unpack in their hurried arrival. They each found boxers and t-shirts and pulled them on. "What's this?" Spike said, snagging the corner of a wrapped box he spied poking out of Xander's bag. Xander smiled nervously. "That? Oh, it's a present." Spike lifted an eyebrow. "For me?" Xander reached out and ran a finger over the plain blue paper. He cleared his throat, and then simply gestured

for the vampire to open the package. Spike ripped the paper and opened the box. He pulled out a v-necked, pale grey silk t-shirt. He pulled it out of the box and rubbed the soft fabric against his face.

He looked more closely at it, and then looked at his lover. "Um, Xan – this is nice, but it isn't my size." The human reached out to touch the fabric lightly and took a shuddering breath. "It's for me," he whispered. Spike looked from the shirt to Xander and back again, not getting it. He looked at the shirt. The grey shirt. The grey and not black shirt. "Oh," he said. "Oh," Xander repeated, looking down at the carpet. Spike gently draped the shirt over Xander's shoulder and rubbed his hand over it. He waited until their eyes met, and said, "When you're ready, luv, when you're ready." Xander stood and folded the shirt and placed it on the dresser. He reached down and pulled Spike to his feet, kissing him lightly on the lips. Yet another loud growl from Xander's stomach sent them down to the kitchen for a snack.

Part Thirty-Five

Spike kicked the back of Buffy's seat one last time, and then ducked the magazine that was tossed at him over its high back. Leaning forward, he reached between the seats and pulled her ponytail. She popped up onto her knees in the seat and glared at him. "Why aren't you asleep?" she whispered, glancing pointedly at Xander, who was sleeping peacefully in his fully reclined seat

with a cashmere throw draped over him. Angel was asleep in his seat also. "Wired," Spike explained. She smiled, "Me, too." Spike stood up from his seat and gestured to the other side of the small private jet they'd chartered for the flight, where two seats stood opposite a small table. The chairs were made of cream-colored leather and the shade of lamp attached to the table was Tiffany glass. As they slid into the comfortable chairs, the door to the cabin opened and a steward entered.

By the blue tone of the demon's skin, not to mention the short horns on its forehead, Spike knew it was a Mithrasil. The race was known to be mildly prescient, so it figured that they would be useful in service industries – they'd pretty much always know when you were ready to order, if not what. The steward bustled to the back of the cabin to access the small kitchen, and then returned with cups of coffee for both of them, pointedly announcing, "Decaf," as he placed them on the table. Spike snorted and reached for the sugar, while Buffy poured enough cream into hers to make it light brown. They sipped in silence for a moment.

"You love him," Buffy stated baldly, watching Spike over the rim of her cup. He nodded, looking across the aisle at Xander's sleeping form. When his eyes met hers again, she asked, "Does he love you?" Spike smiled, and it was a pure, open smile, with no guile or smugness in it. "He will." She nodded. "That's good," she said. "I think it's your natural state – both of you – being in love." At Spike's open-mouthed look she smirked. "What, I can't be insightful?" He closed his mouth and then took another sip of his coffee. "I never said you couldn't, Slayer, but it still gives me the

wiggins, to quote you – and him.” They shared a smile.

They sipped quietly for a few moments, and then Buffy said, “You know, Dawn and Jase are going to try to have a sibling for Sara.” She blinked as the brilliant smile lit up the vampire’s face again. “That’s great,” he said. “When are you and Angel going to make a baby?” She spluttered, “Us? We can’t ... vampire ...” He laughed softly. “Well, I was thinking that with Red in town, you could get her to invoke the mojo and actually make one.” Her eyes widened. “You mean, like, in the kitchen with the herbs and chanting and the mortar and pestle kind of making?” He nodded. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She tried again. “I don’t know if he wants ... if we’re ready ... um ... I have to think about that, a lot.” She grimaced at Spike. “Now I’ll never get to sleep.” He sipped his coffee and grinned. The steward reappeared and started clearing their cups, telling them to return to their seats for the descent into Atlanta.

Xander flopped backward onto the king-sized bed as Spike pressed a bill into the bellhop’s hand and slammed the door behind him. The vampire noted that his lover had already kicked off his shoes and untucked his black shirt so that it rode up over his lean belly. Xander had one forearm draped over his eyes as he sprawled bonelessly on the huge bed amid a dozen throw pillows. “I’m really digging the whole you being rich thing, Spike,” he said. “Does that make me shallow?” Spike kicked off his boots, stripped off his sweater and joined his lover on the bed, mimicking his pose. “I dunno. Would it make you feel any better if I told you that Angel is paying?” Xander rolled onto his

side to gape at Spike, who peeked out from under his forearm, blue eyes twinkling merrily. "You made him pay? For the flight and the hotel? Classic," he pronounced. "Limo, too," Spike reminded him, and Xander flopped back down on the bed, giggling. "Let's order a whole shitload of room service, then." He reached for the phone.

"OK, you win – that's grosser than me dipping French fries in my milkshake," Xander conceded, watching Spike eat a slice of apple pie drenched in blood. "What?" the vampire replied, "It's All-American, innit?" Xander merely shuddered. Spike happily munched his pie and watched Xander alternately eat bites of chocolate mousse and key lime pie, sometimes mixing the two together before shoving the whole green and brown spoonful into his mouth. Reaching over, the vampire snared the maraschino cherry that decorated the dollop of whipped cream topping the mousse. Xander deftly snatched it out of his hand and popped it into his mouth, stem and all. He chewed happily, and then smiled at Spike's outraged look. "Mine," he explained. "'Sides, I have to show you my one and only bar trick." Spike watched as Xander contorted his face for a couple of minutes, and then grinned broadly when the human stuck out on his tongue. The cherry stem rested there, tied in a neat knot. Spike swooped in and kissed Xander, then broke the kiss to spit the knotted cherry stem across the room.

They fell back onto the bed; travel-weary and full, happy to simply lay side by side, hands lightly touching. Spike was loath to break the mood, but needed to ask Xander a question. Rubbing his hand

lightly up the human's tanned arm, he looked up at the ceiling and asked, "How do you want me to play this with your in-laws, Xan?" Xander covered Spike's hand with his own and pressed down. "I'm thinking partial truth. I'll just introduce you and Angel and Buffy as my friends and leave it at that. It's not really any of their business, and it would be cruel to rub their faces in it." Spike remained quiet for a moment, and then spoke. "Which d'you think would bother them more, that you've got somebody new, or that the somebody is male?" Xander leaned his head against Spike's shoulder. "I dunno," he sighed. "Does it matter?" He shrugged, and then turned to lay a light kiss on the vampire's neck.

"So, you're saying I've got you?" he asked. Spike's eyes opened sleepily. "Huh?" Xander met his eyes. "You said I've got somebody new. That's you. So I've got you, right?" Spike's eyes closed and he sighed. "Do we have to be all soft and fluffy and talk about feelings now?" he mock-whined. Xander lightly bumped their heads together. "Yes," he laughed. "Yes, we do – my soft and fluffy little heart needs it. Spill." Spike hauled himself up on one elbow so he could look down into Xander's face. "You had me at 'hello'," he quoted. Xander giggled. "Except I never said 'hello'. You opened the door before I could knock and you growled at me and I said 'Spike, it's me, Xander.'"

"That's true," Spike conceded. "Actually, Xan, you had me from the moment you told me that you burned for me – in my kitchen, against the refrigerator. You've got me – as much as you want for as long as you want." He watched as Xander's eyes darkened, and heard the human's heartbeat speed up slightly. "That was hot,"

he rasped, tongue darting out to moisten suddenly dry lips as he savored the memory of the kiss. "Stopping you was so hard; I didn't want to, but I needed to." Spike nodded. "I know, pet, I understood. Besides, you were worth waiting for. That fluffy enough for ya?" Xander's smile softened and the bright flare of lust mellowed. He leaned up and placed a soft kiss on Spike's cheek, then rubbed his own cheek over the spot he'd just kissed. They both shifted their weight so that they could wrap their arms around one another, with Xander lying half on top of Spike, their faces still pressed together.

With cool fingers carding through his hair, Xander tried to put a name to the way he was feeling. Safe came to mind, and warm, and loved, but none of those words seemed to cover the entire concept. He tightened his arms a little more, and smiled at the answering pressure from Spike's. Home, he thought. I'm home. Not Atlanta – Spike. Glancing at the window to make sure the blackout drapes were in place, Spike flipped the corner of the bedspread up to cover them and drifted off to sleep.

Part Thirty-Six

The limousine prowled slowly through the cemetery. In the gathering twilight, the tombstones and monuments cast long shadows and the neatly pruned trees reached up into the violet sky. The car stopped, and Xander exited it, slipping carefully out the door to be sure no stray sunlight penetrated the cool sanctuary behind tinted windows. He walked around to the front of the car. The driver's window lowered smoothly and the uniformed chauffeur handed Xander a bunch of Stargazer lilies. Xander nodded and watched as the

window slid back into place. He ran a hand through his hair, following it down past his collar, noticing for the first time how long it was getting. He took a deep breath and started up the path.

This cemetery was remarkably well kept. The gravesites were weed-free, and several areas held benches and fountains complete with landscaping designed to provide a discreet retreat for grieving loved ones. Xander walked the path without thinking; not needing to engage his brain at all as his feet took him to the familiar spot. Shari's stone was black, and the interior of the incised words was picked out in a silvery grey. Under her name and dates it simply said, "Adored Daughter, Beloved Wife, Loving Mother, Cherished Friend." Leaning against it was a smaller stone. It was gray, and simply said "Lex". Xander had had it custom-made – the name was in Shari's precise, flowing script.

A small bouquet of spring flowers rested on the grave. It was tied with a ribbon and had a glass vial around the stems to hold water. Next to it rested a toy train. Xander knew that these were from Shari's parents. A vase attached to the base of the stone held slightly faded lilies identical to the ones Xander had brought. He had a standing order for their weekly delivery. He removed the blossoms and replaced them with the ones he carried. He sat cross-legged on the soft grass and laid his hand on the front of Lex's marker, tracing the whorls of his name. He slowly moved his hand to Shari's stone and traced the word "wife" in the inscription.

Xander remembered the many days he'd sat in this exact place and traced the carved words on both

stones again and again, unable to do more than stare at them and cry. His heart was heavy, but his eyes were dry, his expression resolved. "I got her, honey," he whispered. "I got the one who took you from me." He paused, then dropped his hands into his lap and looked up at her name. "I got something else, too – something I never expected. I got some old friends back. They aren't a substitute for you, just more people to love." He drew in a shaky breath and smiled at the monument. "Back when we were dating and I would get jealous of your male friends, you'd always tell me that love doesn't divide – it multiplies. Well, I finally got it. Letting myself love Buffy and Willow and Dawn and Cordelia again made me understand, and it's helped me so much."

He picked up the toy train and played with it absently as he spoke. "I miss you, Shari, and I miss Lex. I miss our life. For a while there, I didn't think I was going to make it. When I went to Sunnydale, I really didn't care if I lived or died, as long as I got Dru." His hands clenched as he remembered his fury upon seeing her standing over Spike with the stake. "And I got her – killed her with my own hands and watched her dust fall. For a minute, when she died, you and Lex were all I could think of. For one perfect second, the two of you were with me. Then you were gone, and Buffy and Angel and Spike were with me. You would have liked them. You and Buffy would have talked fashion and ass-kicking, and you and Angel could have discussed poetry." He paused and wiped his eyes roughly with the back of his hand. "You and Spike – I could see the two of you drinking beer and arguing about, well, anything. He would have given you a run for your money in the smart remarks department. You and

Dawn could've talked babies, and you would even have liked Cordy – probably taken her down a few pegs, too, when she needed it. And Willow – God, you'd have loved Willow."

Xander's shoulders slumped, and he put the toy train down reverently by Lex's marker. "I'm so sorry, honey. I'm so sorry that I didn't tell you things, that I hid such a big part of my life from you. I just wanted to have a normal life. I just wanted you and our son to have one, too. I should have known better. I always prided myself on not keeping secrets, on always showing my true face, but that was a lie. I should have told you. I should have trusted you enough, and I'm sorry I didn't." He sighed and rose to his knees. "I'm not going to make that mistake again, Shari. I have a chance to have something extraordinary with Spike, with Will, and I'm going to do my best to make it good. I think he and I can be good together." He stood and placed his hand on the top of the gravestone. "I won't ever stop loving you and Lex. Never. If you can see me or hear me, I hope I can make you as proud as you always made me." He stood quietly for a moment, and then turned back to the manicured path. As he turned the corner, he could see the dark limousine and the figure standing by the door. Spike had worn dark trousers and a light sweater under a three-quarter-length leather jacket, and he stood with his hands in his pockets staring up the hill, looking for Xander.

Xander thought he looked beautiful in the moonlight, his pale hair and skin glowing against the dark leather of his coat. He walked slowly down the hill and stopped in front of the vampire. "You OK, luv?" Spike asked. Xander nodded, and then leaned forward to place a soft

kiss on his lips. "Yeah," he said, "I'm OK." They shared a smile, and then climbed into the car to join Angel and Buffy.

The driver wound his way expertly through the residential area. Buffy reached into the limousine's refrigerator and pulled out two bottles of water, passing one to Xander, who nodded gratefully. "You don't think the limo's going to be too much?" she asked, her nose wrinkling. The car pulled up to a large gated lot and the driver stopped to speak into an intercom box. The gates slid open and the car moved up the driveway. Xander looked up at the large, dramatically lit house they were approaching and told Buffy, "Nope." Her mouth dropped open and she replied, "I guess not." The house was modern in style, and its white walls gleamed, details picked out by small spotlights from the lawn. The lawn itself was manicured and beautifully landscaped. The car pulled into the circular drive and the driver got out to open the door. Xander squeezed Spike's hand once and climbed out.

As soon as his feet hit the ground, the front door of the house opened and a petite Japanese woman skipped lightly down the shallow stairs. She ran to Xander and threw her arms around him. Spike could hear her repeating his name softly as she clung to his much larger frame. A medium sized Japanese man came down the stairs at a more sedate pace, but he, too, was beaming at Xander. Spike, Angel and Buffy stood back as he approached the group. Xander set the woman down on her feet, but she refused to let go of one of his hands, wrapping both of her small ones around it. Xander and the man shook hands, and at his

father-in-law's serious look, Xander nodded. The older woman caught the exchange and gasped, raising one hand to cover her mouth. She then lifted Xander's hand to her face and pressed it against her cheek. Her eyes were full of tears. Xander raised his other hand to cup her cheek and smiled at her sadly.

The others watched the exchange with grave expressions on their faces, and Buffy reached out to place one hand on the back of each vampire. They both moved a step closer to her. At their slight movement, Xander turned. "Let's go inside," he said, "we can do the introductions there." They all walked to the door, and Xander made a point of inviting them in by name. As they entered, Buffy, Angel and Spike looked around curiously at the house, which was decorated in a combination of contemporary pieces and Asian antiques. In the large foyer, Xander made a sweeping gesture toward his friends. He smiled at his parents-in-law. "Mama Lily, Lee – these are my friends. This is Angel, and Buffy and William." Everyone shook hands, and Angel and Spike noticed that Lee looked at both of them very carefully before shaking their hands and nodding. Buffy was surprised to note that while Lee still had a trace of a Japanese accent, Lily's was pure Southern. She shook her head a little and smiled when Lily invited them into the kitchen, addressing the entire group as "y'all".

Once they were all seated around the kitchen table with glasses of iced tea, Lee surprised his guests by looking at Xander closely and asking softly, "You killed the one who took Shari and Lex, yes?" Xander met his eyes and nodded. "Yes. My friends helped me." Lee stared at Xander for another long moment, then

nodded sharply. "Good," he said. He looked at the other three in turn, each for a long moment. Still looking into Spike's eyes, he asked, "You love him, yes?" All three nodded. Lee jerked his head in a short nod again, and then looked at Xander with a grin. "You hungry, Xan?" Xander nodded enthusiastically, and everyone except Lily rolled their eyes. She jumped up, and moments later placed an elaborate tray of delicate sushi on the table, passing around chopsticks.

They dug in, and after a few moments they were all talking and laughing. Spike noticed the care with which the older couple treated Xander. It was obvious that they loved him as their son. He basked in their attention, like a child who'd brought home a perfect report card receiving praise. However, he didn't leave his friends out of the warm circle he shared with his family. He got Lily and Angel started on a conversation about literature, and soon had Lee showing Buffy the long shelf of obscure kitchen implements that decorated the kitchen. Xander leaned back in his chair and expertly swept up a tuna roll with his chopsticks and popped it into his mouth. Spike turned to face him. "They're very nice," the vampire said, "I like them." Xander swallowed his mouthful and grinned. "They're awesome – like the parents I always wanted and never had." Spike nodded, and then his expression turned sad. "Will you stay with them when you move back home?" he asked, looking down. Xander's smile broadened and he leaned in closer, so his lips were only an inch away from Spike's ear. "No," he said simply, and leaned back. Spike shivered at the sensation of Xander's warm breath in his ear, and looked up to find the human sitting back in his chair, grinning at him. He opened his mouth to ask another

question, but was cut off when the others moved back to the table.

The conversation ebbed and flowed. Lee and Lily never asked for details about Drusilla, and the others never offered them. Over the course of the evening, Lily had deftly managed to separate Angel, Buffy and Spike from the group in turn and express her gratitude with simple words and a fierce hug. Finally, she excused herself from the group, pleading exhaustion. Xander hugged her tenderly and kissed her soft cheek. "I love you, Mama," he whispered against her silky black hair that was so much like Shari's. Over her shoulder he caught Buffy's gaze, and could see the tears that welled up in her eyes. Turning, Lily also saw them, and she walked to the Slayer's side and pulled her into a gentle hug. Buffy hugged the tiny woman back, then watched as she walked up the stairs. Angel rubbed her back soothingly and dropped a kiss on her temple while she wiped her eyes.

Lee returned to the group and ushered them into a beautifully decorated study. They ranged themselves across two leather couches, and Lee poured them all brandies. He sat in a wing chair across from them and looked down into his glass as he swirled the amber liquid. He took a short sip, and then turned to Xander. "Son," he said, "I owe you much gratitude. I won't ask for details, but I need to know that there won't be any legal ramifications for all of you, regarding Shari's killer." Xander reached out and laid his hand on his father-in-law's knee. "It's all taken care of, Lee. You don't have to worry about us." Lee smiled and relaxed. He turned his gaze to the others in turn. "I owe each of you a debt of gratitude, you are all welcome in my

home at any time." He sighed, and then looked at Xander again. "You aren't coming back here, are you, Xan?" he asked. "Not to stay." Xander's smile was sad. "No, Lee. My plan is to stay in California for a while, if my friends will have me." He felt Spike lay one hand flat on his back, and leaned into the contact slightly. Lee nodded. "Then I have no doubt that you will be well cared for," he said.

They all relaxed and finished their brandies. Xander announced their intention to leave, and Buffy herded Angel and Spike outside after the men exchanged handshakes and she hugged Lee hard. Once they were alone, Lee turned to Xander and smiled gently. "We will miss you, Xan," he said. "I hope that you are able to find some happiness in California. If you ever need us ..." His voice trailed off into silence. Xander hugged the smaller man to him briefly. "I will, Lee. I'll always need you. I'll miss you both." Lee ushered him to the door and stood watching as the limousine pulled away.

Inside the car, all was quiet. Buffy sat in the shelter of Angel's arms, and Xander and Spike sat side by side, shoulders touching. The driver pulled up at the hotel and opened the door. They filed out of the car and entered the elevators in silence. Angel turned to Xander. "When do you want to go back?" he asked. Xander looked at him thoughtfully. "Tomorrow night is fine - I'm done here," he said. Angel nodded, and he and Buffy exited the elevator on their floor. At their own floor, Spike and Xander got off the elevator and walked slowly to the door of their suite. Xander unlocked it and ushered the vampire inside.

Part Thirty-Seven

Spike walked over to the window and pulled the heavy drapes aside, allowing moonlight to spill into the room. Xander crossed the room to him and wrapped his arms around the vampire's narrow waist, hooking his chin over one shoulder. Spike leaned back into the embrace and sighed. "I'm glad you're coming back with us, Xan. I was afraid you wouldn't want to." Xander hugged him tighter and kissed the side of his neck. "I knew you were worried. Don't be." He turned Spike around in his arms and looked into his eyes. "I want to tell you something. You know earlier, when we had the conversation about me having you from 'hello'?" Spike nodded. Xander smiled at him and resumed speaking. "I'm going to tell you when you had me, OK?" He laughed when Spike smiled and nodded eagerly.

"You had me from the moment you came out from behind your desk in your study and looked me in the eye and told me that your work could wait; that you wanted to be with me." They shared a soft smile at the memory. "Will," Xander said, "you have no idea how much that meant to me. After Shari and Lex died, nobody wanted to be with me. Well, OK," he said, at Spike's stormy expression, "maybe they wanted to, but nobody knew how to be with me. It was too uncomfortable; no one knew what to say or not to say." Xander's smile faltered at the memories of that terrible time. "But you, Will, you didn't care about all that; you just wanted to be with me. And that's the moment when my heart opened up just a little, and

you started squeezing yourself in there.” Xander closed the distance between their lips with a gentle kiss. He pulled back enough so he could look into Spike’s eyes. “So, tonight,” he said, “I want to be with you. I want you in my arms and in my heart. Can I make love to you, Will? Will you have me?” Spike returned the serious look, and then his face softened into a beautiful smile. Just before their lips touched, he whispered a single word, “always.”

The kiss started off gently, and Spike followed his lover’s lead, understanding that this was an enormous step for Xander. Soon, the human couldn’t stop himself from deepening the kiss, twisting his hands into Spike’s hair and licking impatiently at his lips, begging entry. Spike gladly granted it, and dug his fingers into the bunched muscles of Xander’s shoulders. Standing by the window, silhouetted by moonlight, they kissed until Xander was gasping for breath. Separating their mouths reluctantly, Xander panted as he slipped Spike’s leather jacket down his arms and off, tossing it over the back of the sofa. The vampire reciprocated, stripping Xander’s black sportcoat from him. Shirts were next, and they each kicked off their own shoes and socks. Xander pulled Spike to him, and reveled in the feel of cool flesh against his own hot chest. His hands circled on Spike’s back and trailed up and down taut, muscular arms. The vampire shivered as hot fingers traced random patterns on the sensitive flesh of his sides.

Xander lifted one of Spike’s hands to his mouth and kissed the base of his thumb, then trailed soft kisses up to the pad. He kissed his way back down the thumb, and then repeated the process with the vampire’s index

finger. Reaching the tip, he engulfed the digit in his mouth and sucked strongly. Spike gasped, and his eyes twinkled in the moonlight. Xander released the finger with a tiny nip. He placed his lips at Spike's wrist and ran his tongue down the delicate veins, tracing them to the crook of the elbow. He closed his lips on the sensitive skin there and sucked again. The vampire's arm straightened involuntarily, but Xander didn't release his hold. He pulled back slightly, and then bit down. Spike's body went rigid and a low growl started in his chest. Xander bit him again, then licked his way up to his lover's shoulder.

Spike threw his head back and panted when the warm tip of Xander's tongue began exploring his collarbone, sliding and teasing the hollow there, teeth grazing the arch of bone. Xander slid his lips across Spike's chest, stopping to dip his tongue in the inviting indentation at the base of the vampire's throat, then continuing on to the other collarbone and down the arm, giving it the same treatment as its twin. By the time Xander completed his journey at the base of Spike's thumb, the vampire was trembling with need. He was so hard that Xander could see the tip of his erection peeking from the waistband of his pants, and the pants themselves bore a spreading stain of moisture. Xander placed Spike's hand at his side and reached into his waistband with the tips of two fingers, sliding them across the crown of Spike's cock and sweeping up a little of the fluid there. He licked his fingers and smiled at his lover.

Spike groaned at the sight of Xander, his pink tongue lightly touching the tips of his fingers, gazing at Spike, brown eyes glittering through his long, dark lashes.

The human took a small step backward and reached between them to unbutton Spike's trousers. He slowly lowered the zipper, then reached inside and curled his fingers around Spike's cock. He simply held it, and then squeezed gently, marveling when the flesh surged against his hand. He pushed Spike's trousers off his hips and the vampire stepped out of them and kicked them away.

Xander stepped back and looked at Spike, standing naked in the moonlight. "You're beautiful," he said, his voice husky. Spike smiled and said, "Take off your pants." Xander laughed, and said, "Ooooooh, romance," but his fingers moved to the button of his trousers. He flicked it open, and then lowered the zipper. He let the pants fall to the floor and stepped out of them. Spike's eyebrow rose when he realized Xander wasn't wearing underwear, and the human smirked. Spike stepped forward, and Xander laid his hand flat on the cool chest before him to hold the vampire in place before their bodies touched. He leaned down and brushed his lips lightly against the shell of Spike's ear. "I'm going to fuck you tonight, Will," he said. Xander swallowed audibly, hardly believing that these words were coming out of his mouth. He pushed the embarrassment away and concentrated on the waves of arousal that were breaking over him. "I'm going to spread you open and push my way inside you. I'm going to fill you up with me, and then I'm going to slide in and out of your tight body so slowly. And, maybe then, if you ask nicely – or maybe if you beg nicely – I'm going to speed up, and I'm going to fuck you through the mattress and make you scream."

Both men were shaking with arousal, and Xander was

pleased to note that Spike was panting as hard as he was. He licked the vampire's ear and smiled when Spike groaned. Xander traced the lobe with his tongue, then sucked it into his mouth and nipped it lightly with his teeth. He pulled his mouth away again. "But, before that, Will, I'm going to make you come." Spike shook his head, and raised his lips to Xander's ear. "No, luv, wanna come with you inside me," he protested. Xander chuckled, "Oh, you will, baby, you will. But I want this to last a long time, and if I fuck you right now, it'll be about thirty seconds, so I'm going to get you off, and you're going to get me off, and then we'll move this into the bedroom for the main event, OK?" Xander felt the vampire nod against his neck and heard him say, "OK."

"Good," Xander continued. "Now, a question. How do you want me to make you come? You can have anything you want." Spike rubbed his forehead against Xander's shoulder for a moment, thinking. He licked a long, wet line up the side of Xander's warm neck, then whispered in his ear, "Want you on your knees, pet. I want to fuck your mouth and come on your face, and then I want to lick you clean." Xander gasped, and a shudder ran through him, but he nodded enthusiastically. "But, before that," Spike continued, "I want to watch you get yourself off." Spike knew that he was kind of taking charge, but Xander had asked, and he was, after all, a dominant creature. Besides, Xander's turn would come in the bedroom, and Spike was determined that his time as bottom to the human would be every bit as satisfying as his turn as top.

Xander pushed Spike backward until they came to the sofa. Spike sat down, spreading his legs comfortably,

and propping one foot up. Xander held up one finger, and then turned to go into the bedroom. He came out holding a bottle of lubricant and a towel. On his way back to Spike, he grabbed one of the room's wing chairs and dragged it along with him. He placed the chair in front of Spike, laid the towel over its back, and sprawled into it, with one leg draped over the arm of the chair. Spike simply looked at him for a moment. His tanned skin glowed in the faint light, and his eyes were dark and glittering. A small smile played the corners of his mouth. His cock was rock-hard, jutting from its nest of curls and standing straight up against his flat abdomen. Spike could see the shiny trails of fluid it had leaked onto Xander's belly, drops shone along the fine line of dark hair that arched under his navel.

A small sigh escaped Spike's lips as Xander's hand came down to stroke himself lightly. Xander stopped, and opened the lubricant, pouring it into his hand. Xander groaned at the slippery sensation and began to stroke in earnest. Spike watched his lover fuck his own fist, mesmerized by the slide and play as the crown of Xander's cock pushed out above his loosely clasped thumb and forefinger. Spike's enhanced vision allowed him to see the spurts of clear fluid that oozed out each time Xander squeezed his responsive flesh. Panting, Xander reached between his spread legs to roll his balls in the palm of his hand, stopping occasionally to tug lightly, then cupping them against his body. Spike couldn't take his eyes away from Xander's hands, no matter how badly he wanted to see his lover's face.

Xander increased his pace, stripping his cock with rough strokes, incredibly turned on by displaying

himself in this way. The only sounds in the room were both men panting and the slide of hand against cock, faster and faster. Finally, Xander could stand it no longer, his hand moved on himself with blinding speed, and low moans were issuing from his throat. He opened his eyes and focused on Spike. The look of pure lust, shot through with love that was on the vampire's face sent him spiraling into his orgasm. "S...Spike!" he gasped, and chanted the name as thick ropes of semen shot onto his chest. He stroked himself as the release tore through him, pulling at his balls and milking the last of his seed from his softening cock. Xander pulled the towel from the back of the chair and wiped himself clean. Spike looked stunned, sitting on the sofa with his cock in his hand and his mouth open in wonder. "You're gorgeous, Xan," he breathed, and got shakily to his feet.

Xander slipped from his chair as the vampire approached him, and knelt on the floor. Spike's cock was so hard it barely bobbed as he walked the few steps between them. Xander smiled up at his lover from his position on the floor, and spread his knees slightly to better brace his position. Spike wound one hand in Xander's hair. He lightly rubbed his fingers against the human's scalp, and then suddenly tightened his grip. When Xander's mouth opened in an involuntary gasp, Spike pushed his cock inside. Xander smiled around the cock in his mouth, then started swirling his tongue around it and dipping his head to moisten the entire length with saliva. Spike's other hand also twisted into his hair, and the cock in his mouth started sliding in and out with a slow, purposeful stroke.

On each stroke, Xander concentrated on breathing through his nose and opening his throat further and further, finally allowing the head of Spike's cock to push against the back of his throat. On Spike's next stroke, Xander swallowed. The vampire groaned at the exquisite sensation of the walls of Xander's throat closing and rippling against the sensitive crown. Xander curled his hands around the backs of Spike's thighs and tightened them, encouraging the vampire to fuck his mouth as hard as he wanted to. Spike didn't need much encouragement. Checking to see that Xander's position was stable, he bent his knees and began to drive his hips backward and forward, sawing his erection in and out of the hot, moist cavern of his lover's mouth. "Gonna come, Xan," he gritted out between clenched teeth as he continued pistoning in and out. Unable to answer, Xander simply dug his fingers into Spike's thighs and opened his throat as widely as he could.

Spike felt his orgasm building, and his first instinct was to simply spill himself into the hot, tight throat he was fucking. But he really did want to come on Xander's face. He wanted to see his lover on his knees, looking up with Spike's essence clinging to his skin. That thought sent the vampire spiraling out of control, and he felt his orgasm ready to burst from him. He pulled out of Xander's mouth and wrapped one hand around his cock. The first burst of come splashed against Xander's cheek, the next near his temple. More landed on his neck and chest. As soon as he could think again, Spike placed his fingers under Xander's chin and raised the human's face. Xander's eyes were glittering black in the pale moonlight, and the semen on his face was white against his tanned skin. Spike marveled at the

sight before him for a moment. Xander's face showed no humiliation or fear, merely satisfaction at pleasing his lover. Spike smiled when Xander leaned forward to place his reddened, bruised lips around the head of the vampire's cock. He sucked hard once, then let go and smiled when Spike howled at the pressure on his sensitive flesh.

Spike dropped to his knees in front of Xander and kissed him lightly on the lips. He then kissed him all over his face, licking up the sticky drops that decorated a dark eyebrow and clung to the hollow below one cheekbone. Spike carefully covered Xander's face in kisses and small licks until it was clean, then moved to his neck and chest. By the time no more traces of semen remained on his body, Xander was again rock-hard. He climbed to his feet and pulled Spike up beside him. Grabbing the bottle of lubricant from the chair, he led his vampire into the bedroom.

Standing next to the bed, Xander dipped his head and captured Spike's lips with his own. It was a bruising kiss, rough with passion. Spike gave back as good as he got and raised his hands to his lover's chest to pinch and pull sharply at his nipples. Xander hissed at the combination of pleasure and pain and raked his nails down the vampire's back. When his hands reached Spike's ass, Xander slammed their lower bodies together. They were both completely hard again, and Xander thrust against Spike's hip. They broke the kiss so the human could catch his breath and climbed onto the bed, falling into each other's arms.

Xander rolled them so that he was on top of Spike. He leaned down and bit and sucked at the pale throat

below him. Spike tangled his hands in Xander's hair and pulled him closer, turning his head to one side with a moan. Xander kissed his way down to Spike's chest and teased his pebbled nipples with tongue and teeth. He continued downward, licking and nipping, until he reached Spike's hips. Suddenly, he sank his teeth into the flesh there, just beside the jut of a hipbone. Spike was sure that only the back of his head and his heels remained on the bed as he arched up. Xander nibbled his way around Spike's hip and up his side.

"Oh God, I want to be inside you, baby," Xander panted. "Want to feel you all around me, holding me, squeezing me. Want to pound into you, make you scream." Spike said, "Oh, fuck yeah, Xan," and pressed the bottle of lube into his hand. Propping himself up on one elbow over Spike's body, Xander deftly flipped the cap and poured lube into his palm using his free hand. Recapping the bottle, he tossed it onto the unused pillow. He rubbed the gel between his fingers and said, "You're gonna like this, Spike. I picked it up when we stopped on the way to the airport." As he finished speaking, he snaked his hand between them and circled Spike's hole with one finger. Spike jumped slightly at the coolness of the lube, then moaned as he felt the gel warming. Xander laughed. "I think they invented this for vamps – self-warming."

He pressed his finger against the opening to Spike's body, and they both hissed as the tip slid inside. "Jesus, Spike, you're so tight. I don't want to hurt you." Spike shook his head and kissed Xander. "Can't hurt me, luv. It's just that I got turned a virgin, so that's the way I stay." Xander groaned at the implications of that little tidbit and slid his finger the

rest of the way in. He remembered stretching himself for Spike, and thought that the vampire felt different inside. He was just as soft, and the muscles clenched and fluttered just like his own, but he was cooler, with none of the searing heat of the human body. Xander paused until he felt Spike pushing down against the intruding digit, then he began to slide it in and out, slowly.

Spike spread his legs wider, and Xander took that as encouragement, pulling his finger out and pressing two back inside. The vampire's head was rolling on the pillow, and he was pushing himself down on Xander's hand. It had been decades since he'd bottomed, and he couldn't wait for the delicious feeling of being entered and filled. The warmth of the lubricant and the burning of his stretching tissues were making his head spin. Xander turned his hand slightly and crooked his fingers, scratching against Spike's prostate and eliciting a loud howl. As the fingers left him, and then pressed back against his opening again, he said, "No." Xander froze, and then looked down into Spike's glittering eyes questioningly. Spike smiled and kissed his lips lightly. "Don't want you to prepare me too much, Xan. I want to feel your cock stretching me." Xander frowned at him. "But it'll hurt," he protested. Spike's smile widened. "Only in a good way," he assured the human, "the best way."

Xander smiled back and began sliding down Spike's body again. "Hey," the vampire said, "where are you going?" The voice was muffled against Spike's stomach, "Going to go play, back soon." His exasperated sigh turned into a gasp of pleasure when he felt Xander's mouth on his balls, licking long, hot

strokes over the flesh there. Xander took one, then the other into his mouth and sucked on them. Stretching his lips, he took them both in and sucked hard. "Oh, fucking hell that's good, sweetheart," Spike babbled, and Xander smiled at the endearment, letting Spike's balls slide out of his mouth. He licked his way back up to Spike's mouth, and then asked, "Are you ready for this?" Spike's answer was to smooth a handful of lubricant over Xander's cock and rub it in until the gel began heating. "In me. Now," he instructed.

Xander pushed himself up on his knees between Spike's spread legs and pushed one of his lover's knees back and maneuvered the other to curve around his waist. He lined himself up at Spike's opening and took a deep breath to regain control. All he could think about was slamming his cock into the tight, cool channel before him, and he was terrified that he was going to come before he even got all the way in. The feel of Spike's body clenching around his fingers had driven him close to the edge. Taking one more deep breath, he slowly drove himself into Spike until his balls slapped against the vampire's ass. Fully sheathed, he held perfectly still, looking down into Spike's face.

As he was breached, Spike thought he'd never felt anything so good. Pleasure and pain, never terribly far apart for a vampire anyway, coalesced into one burning, stretching, sliding, utterly satisfying sensation. He looked up at Xander, hovering over him, and smiled. "So good," he moaned. "Come on, Xan – I thought you were gonna make me scream." Xander kissed him hard on the lips, and then pulled his cock almost all the way out of Spike's body. Just before he could protest the loss, Xander slammed forward,

crushing against Spike's prostate, stretching him impossibly wide, filling him impossibly full and then pulling back to do it again. And Spike screamed. And Xander found the word that he screamed very satisfying indeed. "Xander!"

Spike's hands alternately curled in Xander's hair and twisted the sheets, as he bucked and arched beneath him. The human pinned the vampire with his weight and fucked him as hard as he could. He could feel the body under him pulling him back inside every time he slid out, and Spike's other leg came up to wrap around his waist. Spike was chanting his name more quietly now, and Xander was babbling and moaning against his neck as he found a hard, fast rhythm. He wanted to reach between them to give Spike some desperately needed friction, but knew he couldn't keep up the pace with only one hand to brace on.

That problem was solved easily as Spike came, howling into orgasm without his cock having been touched at all. His ass clenched around Xander's cock, and for a moment the human thought he had a chance to avoid coming and make this incredible ride last longer. But, that was not to be – he couldn't hold on through Spike's seemingly endless orgasm, and found himself screaming "Spike!" as he erupted inside his lover's body, shooting spurt after spurt of heat into him.

Finally, they stopped moving, and Xander propped himself up on his hands and looked down into Spike's eyes. "That looks good on you," he panted. Spike looked confused. "What looks good on me?" he asked. "Me," Xander said and kissed him on the tip of the nose.

Part Thirty-Eight

Looking through the bedroom door, Xander could see Spike. The vampire was sitting cross-legged on the couch. He was fully dressed, drinking a mug of blood and staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the twinkling lights of downtown Atlanta. Xander shook his head. If he'd been fucked the way he'd fucked Spike the night before, sitting cross-legged would be off the menu for several days. He figured that without vampire healing he was probably more sore than Spike was. He snorted and turned back to the suitcase that was lying on the bed, almost completely packed. He placed his shaving kit into a pocket of the case, and then let the towel that was loosely wrapped around his hips fall to the floor. He pulled on a pair of black boxer briefs, socks and jeans. He strode back into the bathroom to comb his hair.

Sitting on the sofa, Spike could hardly believe his good fortune. Xander was going home with him. The previous night, Spike had asked him to stay at the Victorian, offering him his choice of bedrooms. Spike smiled as he remembered the love in Xander's eyes when he'd said that sharing the master bedroom would suit him just fine. Xander had not told Spike that he loved him, but Spike didn't care. He would, in time. He might already, but he wasn't ready to say those words to a lover again, not yet.

As dawn was breaking outside the blackout drapes they had lain in each other's arms and whispered and planned. Xander's employer was flexible, so he could continue working from Sunnydale for the same firm, though Spike had assured him that he had enough money for both of them if the human chose not to work. Spike had suggested that Xander consider opening a Sunnydale branch of his Master's dojo, though he'd said "Alan" and not "Master". Xander's eyes had lit up, and he'd promised to think about it, so Spike was pretty sure that it was a foregone conclusion. He'd reminded Xander that Jase wanted to be trained, and that the Slayers-in-training could always use more skills. Spike smiled broadly remembering the look of wonder and happiness that had crossed Xander's face at the thought of having his own school.

Spike heard a small noise behind him and turned, placing his mug on the end table. Xander stood in the doorway to the bedroom, and Spike smiled at him automatically. His smile faltered at the worried look on the human's face. Spike got to his feet and took a step toward Xander, then stopped in his tracks. Xander was wearing the gray silk t-shirt, and Spike could see him fiddling with his hands. Twisting his rings, Spike thought. He walked to the human's side and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "You look good, Xan," he said softly.

Xander looked up and smiled sadly. "Thanks, Will," he said softly. "We're going home – I thought it was time." Spike nodded. "Whatever you want, luv." They stood quietly for a moment, and Spike looked down when Xander pulled his right hand away from his left. The

two platinum bands were gone. The vampire reached down and touched the groove that they had left in the flesh of Xander's finger. "Oh, Xan, are you sure?" he whispered, looking back up. Xander met his eyes. "It's time. It just ... hurts." He opened his right hand, and the two rings were lying there in his palm. Spike kissed him softly on the lips, and then carefully took the rings. He turned Xander's right hand over and slipped them onto his ring finger. He twined their hands together, and then looked up into Xander's eyes, awash in tears. The human leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on the lips of his lover, his friend. "Thank you, Will," he said. "Let's go home."

The End