

FEEDBACK: Love some.

ARCHIVE/DISTRIBUTION: You want this?

SUMMARY: You meet the damndest people at the airport.

SPOILERS: Through Season 6. Set fifteen years after Season 6 finale.

CONTENT/WARNINGS: Some four letter words

RATING: PG now. NC-17 soon.

DISCLAIMER: Not mine, Never were. All rights to Joss, Mutant Enemy and assorted capitalist entities.

NOTES: Unbeta-ed. All mistakes are mine alone

Midnight at LAX

by

Ahestele

Part One

Fifteen years. Fifteen years and a lifetime ago he threw a punch at that face, blinded by betrayal, humiliation and rage. The first and only time he struck someone who couldn't fight back, the first time he felt the specter of his father so close beneath his skin that he woke up from a nightmare that night and vomited. Fifteen years, and he

could still place the voice, that voice, in one second: whisky and velvet, smoke and sin. "Whiskey, neat. Bring the bottle."

Turning slowly, Xander followed the English accent to its owner, and time stood still.

He looked the same, but not. Same long black leather duster, same cut glass cheekbones and slightly pouted pink mouth, lashes a dark fringe on the alabaster skin. Lit cigarette held between two fingers, tendrils of smoke rising from the tip to dissolve in the pre-digested, beery smell that most bars, and airport bars in particular, seemed to have. But the hair, god, the hair.

No longer blinding white bleached blond it fell in tousled honey colored curls, framing the sculpted planes of his face, falling over the smooth forehead. It must be his natural color and it made him seem even younger, if that was possible. The white peroxide severity of the cut before had added a brittle, hard edge to the vampire, made him a study of dizzying contrasts: blond hair, dark lashes, perfect features, scar at his brow, luminescent Dresden skin, black leather. Always black leather, with a dash of red. Death and blood.

Hasn't smelled me yet, he thought, amazed at how easily his mind slipped into Suundydale thought, thought his

thirty-five year old mind chafed against after all these years. Must be rusty. But something else was awry with the vampire. Xander couldn't quite pin it down, but Spike felt off. He had spent enough time disliking the demon to know. Sometimes his dislike had bordered on rage with an ugly undercurrent of jealousy coming up the backstretch. Rage at the pale, cat graceful creature that embodied everything Xander Harris never would be. It took him some long years and lots of thinking to figure that out. Amazing what hindsight and the first sign of gray at your temples will do for a man's clarity.

But Spike wasn't that rusty, no, because he could see the instinct kick in, finally. The relaxed shoulders became still, the features a mask of calm, and slowly, slowly Spike turned to look at him, attitude oozing from every pore. They locked eyes, and Xander felt his mouth unhinge, flap in the wind to catch flies, met equal shock in eyes blue as a summer morning.

Sweet Jesus, he had a soul.

It practically shone from those eyes, more open and naked than a vampire's should ever be. It marked each orb with such a haunted, bruised look Xander caught himself wanting to reach out and shut them, as if Spike lay in a coffin, just to turn off that look. His fingers

twitched with the want of it. Tara would say Spike's aura had completely changed.

The memory of the sweet, shy girl he knew once, and how she died, twisted his gut in an instant. He hadn't thought of her in years; he didn't think of that time if he could help it because those memories had teeth that ripped and shredded the careful, safe life he'd cultivated in L.A. Too much of a walk down memory lane and he needed more than a shot of whiskey to sleep at night. His eyes slipped shut against the onslaught of images, fighting it, fleeing in his head until he could breathe again. When he opened his eyes once more Spike was gone.

He'd slapped a bill on the bar and sped out the door before he even registered his actions. In the milling chaos of midnight travelers he walked quickly, scanning for the vampire, not thinking of why, just acting. Goddamnit, he couldn't have gone far! Just as keen disappointment began to sprout in his chest he spied the sign for the men's bathroom.

When all else fails, hide in the John. He'd practically lived by that credo in high school.

The place didn't even have a door so he rushed in scanning the urinals and corners, ignoring the mirror. It's

why he hadn't noticed Spike sitting at the bar. Nothing, but one of the doors was shut. Bending over Xander checked under the stall and saw scuffed Doc Martens, black jeans and the hem of a weathered duster that had seen better days. Straightening up he approached the closed door slowly, wondering what he planned to say. He hadn't thought that far ahead.

For long moments nothing happened. The tension got to him and he opened his mouth to say God knew what, because he certainly didn't, when a wary sigh sounded from the other side of the blue resin door. A low voice muttered, "Bugger."

"Back at you, Fangless." The quip fell out of his mouth from another time and place, and Xander shook his head. Excellent. Not ten minutes since he'd seen the vampire and already channeling his high school self.

Sounds of the latch coming undone, and Xander stepped back as the door opened allowing William the Bloody to step through. For a time they just stared at each other, and Xander wondered what the vampire saw. He saw himself every morning, but had ceased to study himself a long time ago.

He knew he had gray, but not too much. Odd strand here and there, and he'd solidified across the chest and lost

the early twenties spread that had begun when the vampire last saw him. Minute lines bracketed his mouth and crinkled at his eyes, and he'd had the goatee about a year, grown on a whim. He guessed it looked okay, and he had gotten more notice from younger women, for all the good it did them, or him. He was dressed in his travel suit of jeans, a Henley tee and flannel over shirt with glasses in his breast pocket. All that research of heavy books with teeny tiny writing as a teen-ager had gotten him in the end. All in all a regular Joe. Nothing to write home about, just your average foam insulation salesman, and he hadn't attracted a demon since Sunnydale. All it took to disable his demon magnet was distance and time.

"Harris." Resigned, low voice, and he noticed for the first time the tension stretched across each muscle of the vampire's body. He was fairly thrumming with it.

"Spike." He returned. "How's the soul working out for you?"

The blond man stepped back as if Xander had struck him, shock and pain warring for dominance on those fine, fine features. He took a step forward, hand outstretched, because he didn't follow Spike for this, to one-up each other. Spike held him back with one arm, tips of elegant, pale fingers touching his chest like tiny points of ice.

"How..." And Spike had never sounded that watery, not even when Buffy took the swan dive off the tower that signaled the beginning of the end of all their innocence. "How..."

"Shouldn't that be my question?" Not one twitch at the bait. "I don't know." He admitted, not moving away from the touch that ghostly hand. "I could sense it, kind of. Your eyes..." The comment evaporated because the eyes he spoke of suddenly looked like brilliant sapphires, and holy god, Spike was going to cry....

"Spike..." His voice sounded scared to his ears and the vampire turned away, lightening quick, almost dodged past him with inhuman speed, but he moved pretty fast for a foam insulation salesman. The cool body in his arms went rigid and, hell, the chip must still be working. Spike didn't move away but his muscles quivered like a tuning fork encased in leather. Xander stared at him, arms full of vampire, wondering how he got himself in this position, and déjà vu much?

"Don't." Ragged, single word said at the wall because the vampire wouldn't face him, had his face turned so much away the tendons in the milky neck stretched and strained.

"Don't what?"

"Just don't." He thinks the body in his arm might totally shake itself to pieces at the rate it's going. "Bloody let go of me pillock..."

"There's the Spike we know and love." At which point Spike began to weep abruptly, silent quaking sobs racking through him with his head bowed down, careless, croissant colored waves and curls falling into his face. Xander couldn't be more surprised if Spike had grown wings and flown.

A group of college kids entered the bathroom and froze at the sight of them, but Xander gave them a measured, even look that dared anyone to make a smartass comment. The group dissipated, eyes averted, throats cleared and Xander eased up his hold on the man in his arms. Spike's sobs had tapered off to infrequent hitches, like after tremors, and he wouldn't look up from under his hair.

"Let's get out of here." Xander whispered, not wanting to give the frat boys more of a show than they'd already had.

Spike let himself be led out of the men's room without so much as a move to run and they had walked ten feet before Xander realized he'd had his arm protectively around the lighter man's shoulders. He held him close,

guiding him around rushing people, which was probably good since Spike still wouldn't come out from behind the soft wall of curls. Xander felt huge next to the blond man, so much more there. The narrow shoulders beneath his arms felt fragile, like they would break under the weight.

Without asking he led them to the most expensive airport restaurant, deserted at this time of night. The maitre'd began to wrinkle his nose in disapproval until Xander slipped him a fifty and they were instantly led to a secluded booth. The drinks he ordered appeared in record time, and he placed one in front of Spike. Alabaster fingers closed around the shot of tequila and lifted, head thrown back with the practiced air of a true expert. Xander sipped at his ginger ale and watched a hand, graceful and pale as a dove, pull the unruly curls away from Spike's tear streaked face and they were locked in each other's gaze again, and again he broke the silence.

"How 'bout those Lakers?"

Spike gave him a completely vexed stare then a wry smirk began to lift the corners of his lips. It was so close to a Spike sneer Xander felt inexplicable relief. Were it not for the tragic sheen in that sky blue he'd believe Spike hadn't changed. But he had.

"Same old Harris. Still using humor as a defense mechanism."

"Worked, didn't it?"

"Yeah."

An awkward silence tried to insinuate itself between them and he quashed it. "So." He stroked condensation from his glass, averting his eyes in hopes it made the vampire more apt to answer. "Want to tell me what happened?"

"Doesn't matter." Spike said almost without inflection, glancing around for the waiter. Xander just could not get used to that hair. It moved with every gesture, softly bouncing, and he caught himself wondering how it would feel.

"Where are you going?"

"Just got back." The vampire reached in the duster for a pack of cigarettes and lit one with a silver lighter, blowing the smoke away from him. Spike didn't know it but each gesture like that freaked him out. Pre-soul Spike would have exhaled smoke in his face and laughed while doing it. "You?"

"Burbank. Business seminar, but I think I missed my flight."

"Sir." The maitred materialized at their table his nose wrinkled up like a prune. "This is a non-smoking establishment."

"Not anymore." Xander said.

"Sorry." They stared at each other across the table then Spike dropped the stare as he looked for an ashtray. Xander didn't take his eyes off him as he reached in his wallet and peeled off a hundred dollar bill, holding it out to the wide-eyed restaurant worker.

"He needs an ashtray."

"Of course." The man disappeared and returned and Spike didn't speak again until Mr. Funny face came and went with the request.

"When did you get so solvent?"

"I do OK. When did you get polite?"

"Came with the soul."

"Bullshit." The word came out angry and he realized, belatedly, that he was. He didn't want this, man, did not

want it like poison. He was too damn old and had worked too damn hard to dig up bones right now. "I gotta go."

"Don't." Snake fast grip on his wrist stopping him from getting up and Xander marveled at the cool silk and slightly rough fingertips against his skin. Fifteen years of labored forgetting and one touch could send him back to the Hellmouth in the blink of an eye. Vampires were real, boogey men did exist and the thing under your bed wanted your soul. "Why?"

Because! he wanted to yell. *Because I can't watch you sit there with your pretty eyes and white skin and that look on your face, and, shit, Spike, I thought you got out. I thought that fucking place hadn't gotten you, not you, godDAMNIT....*

"Where are you staying?" he asked before he could stop himself. Spike loosened the hold on his wrist and ran a hand through the dark blond waves and curls again in a gesture he hadn't had before. Of course not. The platinum blond coiffure of fifteen years ago had swept away from the sculpted cheekbones and square jaw, an uncompromising trademark held in place by tons of hair products. This loose, tousled look was almost Victorian.

"Hotel room."

"Where?"

"I don't know yet." Spike began reaching in his pocket once more and Xander moved to stand.

"Come on." The sky blue eyes looked at him rise with puzzlement and he sighed, motioning with his hand. He wouldn't let himself call the look on Spike's face gratitude. He just didn't think he would be able to take that.

Part Two

Spike rested his bag on the floor and stood in the middle of the living room while Xander walked around turning on lights and checking his messages.

He lived in a town house he'd found for a good price after seeing the description in the paper under 'Repos~ Property.' Not fancy, but all right. He'd have liked a yard, and a dog, but otherwise it suited him pretty well, and the neighborhood was middle class and quiet. He'd decorated the place all by his lonesome and felt pretty

good about it. Over the years he'd accumulated better furniture and a decent stereo system, and actually purchased some framed comic art that he'd had his eye on since his high school days. Maybe other people developed mature interests into adulthood, and he had a few, but give him a good comic book any day. The living room set had a warm plaid pattern, the rug was simple burgundy and dark wood made up the tables. A collection of photos spread over the fireplace mantle and a large print of the Superfreinds cartoon series from the late seventies took up the space above.

It was to the pictures Spike walked, studying them in silence, and he joined him, taking in the eclectic array of frames. Here was his favorite picture from high school with Willow, Buffy and him laughing their ass off at something. A small pewter square held Giles in all his stuffy splendor and another had an older, shorter haired Slayer with her arms around a teen-age Dawn, both of them beaming at the camera. Almost hidden was a very small picture of Jesse he'd had to cut out of the yearbook because exchanging pictures was all girly and 'eww' during freshmen year, and then Jesse had been gone. The only Scooby not on the mantle was Oz, but Xander had framed an old Dingoes poster and it had it's own place of honor in the hall.

The pictures were his good memories, the ones he chose to have. The ones without snake demons and mind sucking goddesses. The ones he wished he dreamt about but didn't.

"Where are they all?" Spike asked, alabaster hand waving at the collection of photos and Xander shrugged.

"Around. The group fractured after Tara died. Willow went to England with Giles and didn't come back. I haven't heard from Oz in years, but I guess he's all right. Anya still owns the shop and does the vengeance thing. Buffy and Dawn are still in Sunnydale, fighting the good fight. Can you believe it?"

"And you came here." Spike surmised quietly. Xander nodded, turning away.

"And I came here."

"Was it hard to leave?" Spike asked in a normal tone and Xander got another hot flush of anger, illogical and fierce.

"Was it hard for you?" He rounded on the vampire and his anger fell in pieces to the ground at the bald pain in those eyes. Never mind that they had all treated Spike like a rabid dog. Never mind that he had wished for the bleached vampire to get gone with a manic fervency. Spike had wormed his way into Buffy's heart, and Spike

hadn't had to watch her always looking up the road for a flash of leather and a whiff of cigarettes. He hadn't had to watch her hang on to hope with white knuckled faith, only to pry the fingers loose one excruciating year at a time. Xander had. It had taken him years to accept Buffy would never turn to him for anything more than platonic solace, and realizing he'd been hanging around waiting for just that had been hard and sobering.

"I never meant to stay gone." Spike whispered. "Went to get the chip removed then come back, but...."

"But?" Xander said, and yeah, he was pushing. The vampire had stirred up silt at the bottom of his carefully calm pond and he could just quid pro quo, and now.

"Wasn't listening too well, was I?" Spike laughed and it sounded like broken glass. "Bloody demon put me through the wringer promising me what I came for so I could give Buffy what she deserved. Teach me to overlook semantics. Before I could stop it he'd given me my bloody soul back. Then after...after it.... was bad." The voice finished almost inaudibly.

"Did you go to Angel? Him being all souled up and all." Xander pointed out and Spike gave that awful grating laugh again.

"No. I think he might have known something happened, felt it, but Dru found me first."

"Oh...shit." Xander said, then amended. "Or...shit? I thought she was the love of your life."

"So did I." Spike said in an empty voice. "She went insane with rage, tried to get me to remember, see what it had been like to do...what we did and I... couldn't...." The trembling had begun again and Xander lay a hand on one slim shoulder but Spike moved away, hugging himself in a brush of leather.

"I couldn't come back to Buffy after that. I couldn't. The things...."

"Where is she now? Drusilla?" Xander asked and Spike swallowed with obvious effort.

"She finally left. I was no fun, and she got tired of my asking her to stake me since I was too cowardly to stake myself. Made herself another pet."

"Spike..."

"I'm so tired." The vampire whispered, his shoulders actually slumping as if the narrative had exhausted him.

"Yeah. I'm beat, too. I have a guest room, or the couch, your choice."

"Thanks."

Xander left to use the bathroom because he had to get away from the vulnerability on that beautiful face. Behind the door he sighed, wondered what had possessed him to ask the vampire here. When he came out Spike lay stretched out on the couch, duster and all, and looked asleep, lashes shuttered against creamy white cheeks.

Walking quietly Xander fetched a quilt from the linen closet and lay it over the unconscious vampire. Or he guessed he was unconscious. Hard to tell without the rise and fall of breath, and he had forgotten that. Tucking the quilt around the slender man he debated whether to pull off the boots then did it. Placing the Docs next to the sofa he moved to go then paused again at the sight of the sleeping form.

He guessed even vampires looked younger in repose. That weird hair he couldn't seem to wrap his mind around floated around the curved cheekbones, framing them. His fingers tingled with the urge to touch the curls and he gave in, running his hand over soft, soft silk. When the sky blue eyes didn't open Xander continued,

carding the sensous strands, feeling them slip into the sensitive dip between his fingers.

Xander searched for the animosity he'd felt with such intensity as a teen, then a young man, and found that well hollow. Besides, what better karma could there be? Take away a man's nature and spit him back out in the world. If that wasn't poetic justice what was?

With a last pet to Spike's head he climbed the stairs to his bedroom.

~*~*~*~*~

He woke with a pressure at his back, cool, still pressure. Blinking in the dark he turned, or tried to. Whoever crawled in bed had done so over sheets and comforter and he had to wiggle, loosening them enough to move.

Spike lay curled up, sans duster, and his head had been pillowed on Xander's back. Arms crossed, legs drawn up in a fetal position the vampire lay fast asleep, skin glowing in the night. A quick glance to the bed table showed it was four in the morning. As his eyes adjusted, despite the fuzziness, Xander looked over the sleeping body and tried to figure out what to make of this. He

didn't really want to wake Spike up. Sleep hadn't relinquished its hold and, even now, warm waves of slumber beckoned him back. He'd almost drifted off again when Spike awakened. He just knew. A change in the air, a stiffness to the figure on the bed. Good to know his instincts hadn't dulled.

The sky blue eyes looked black in the dark and Xander stared at the vampire, putting the ball in his court.

"Sorry." Spike whispered and Xander waited. A myriad of emotions tripped across the aquiline features then, "I was cold."

He started to mention the extra blankets in the linen closet, and prudently ignore the redundancy of a vampire getting chilly, but the words died in his throat. Spike didn't mean that kind of cold. Pained embarrassment had begun to seep onto Spike's face and he began to get up, but Xander sighed and grasped a cool, soft hand.

"Go to sleep," he mumbled. "Get under the damn covers. I'm getting all tangled up this way."

"Are you hallucinating?" Spike asked after a moment.

"Don't be an ass." He closed his eyes, not so much pretending to sleep because Spike could probably hear the heart beat and sense his wakefulness, but to signal

his removal from the decision. After long minutes there was a shuffle, lifting of covers and a fully clothed slender body slipped next to his. Xander could feel the tension like a scream, but it ebbed away slowly. He drifted into slumber again as Spike relaxed, and his last thought before sleep took him was how strange it felt to share a bed again after all these years. Strange, but nice.

MORNING

His body clock woke him up at six on the dot rain or shine, weekend or workday. Xander stretched, savoring the knowledge that he could go right back to sleep because he'd blown off the seminar and this was Saturday. The room lay shrouded in darkness from the heavy drapes he'd invested in. The key to sleeping late on weekends and holidays when your internal clock clamored for action was darkness. He closed his eyes and snuggled closer to the soft body in his arms, then froze, eyes popping open.

The night before came back to him, but he distinctly remembered clothes being present. Uh-huh, he'd been in boxers but Spike had climbed in jeans and all, he remembered that. Somewhere along the way the vampire had disrobed and acres of satiny, warm skin lay

flush against him, tucked into his lap, legs intertwined. Xander blinked frantically trying to figure out how to disentangle from the intoxicating presence because other parts of his body were doing what they did in the morning, and his wake-up erection had enthusiastically woken up. Stirred by the scent of musk and ash his cock got that heaviness he knew so well. Xander shut his eyes willing it to go away, because this was so not acceptable.....

The sleek hips wedged against his stomach pushed gently back causing him to gasp from the contact. A deep sound came from the vampire, throaty and languorous. Trembling, Xander tried to find a safe place to lay the hand not pinned under Spike but there was nowhere. Marble white impossibly soft body all over him and he finally lay his palm on Spike's shoulders, shuddering at the yielding coolness.

The vampire sighed, arched up into his touch with a faint moan and Xander hissed at the silky contact rubbing against his chest on the sparse hair, lushly molding to his body. He felt so hard every drop of blood must be between his legs, the erection jutting and pulsing into Spike's ass, cool globes through the thin cotton of his boxers, and it had been way, way too long since he'd gotten laid.

"Spike," he said hoarsely, shaking with the effort of reining in the desire to embrace the flesh in his arms and sink into the heavenly satin. He would not take advantage of a dream, or a borrowed memory, or whatever had the man in his arms sliding all over him like a feline. Spike stopped then a hand closed around his and moved it between firm, muscled thighs to curl around the hardness there. Xander's breath left his lungs in a surprised pant.

"Spike," he tried again, strained and trembly and the vampire half turned in his arms and finally spoke.

"Yes." The lone, whispered word undid the tenuous thread holding him together and with a groan Xander enveloped the body in his arms. His fevered face caressed the smooth shoulders unmindful of his morning shadow, his hand pumped Spike's cock light and quick, moving the foreskin up and down. The vampire began to quiver from the attention, moans and sighs finding Xander's hard on and making it leak. He gripped the slender hips in his hands and pulled them down, grinding himself desperately into the firm, rounded ass, a strangled cry escaping him. Spike's hand reached back and drew him ever nearer, god so strong, and Xander ran his lips over the perfect back, kissing shoulder blades and the line of spine, the long, pale neck.

"Please Xander, please, god, please..." The mantra filtered through his desire-clouded mind and he slipped his arms under Spike's to touch his chest in expansive strokes, his fingers rising and falling on the delineated muscle. One flicked at the stiff nipples while the other dipped to travel over hard, tight stomach dusted with hair and that cock weeping moisture all over his fingers.

"God, so beautiful..." He didn't even realize he'd been mumbling the same three words until his hand reached under Spike's hardness to the tight scrotum, rolling, and the vampire's growl cut off his voice flat.

Getting the message Xander fumbled his boxers off and reached behind him for the small tube of lubricant he kept in the drawer because only he and Mrs. Palmer's five daughters had been sharing his bed for, oh, ever. Flicking open the top with his thumb he coated his fingers and tossed the tube aside. Panting, because breathing was getting difficult, he slipped a steadying hand across Spike's chest while the other inched into the velvet fissure between the soft, cool curves.

"In me." Spikes' voice was ragged. The sound hardened him even more and he slipped a finger slowly into the tight ring of muscle, breaching then entering, and the sensation almost made him come right then. Jesus, so

tight, the channel clung to the intrusion, slippery and deep and he pushed further, searching, reaching, until....Spike made a guttural sound as Xander brushed the tiny nodule of nerves, then another, and then the vampire drew up his knees, opening himself more, and Xander couldn't wait longer if he wanted to. Pulling out the invading digit Spike's whimper of protest choked off as Xander slid home in one quick thrust, the soft, gentled flesh welcoming him, clasping him so tight, oh god....

Spike trembled non-stop in his arms, breathing harsh and loud and why, he didn't need air, and Jesus GOD. Every nerve in him screamed he move, drive ruthlessly deep but he tried to control himself, not wanting to hurt the slender creature he held because, blood sucker, whatever, he could wrap his arms almost twice around the slim shoulders.

"Spike...." he whispered, the effort of holding back beading sweat on his brow. "Okay? You okay?"

"Fuck me." Very little humanity lived in that snarl and instead of scaring him it exploded all his senses into razor sharp awareness. Satin and musk and fine bones beneath his hands and hot pulsing erection in his hand and he rolled his hips, thrusting, using muscles almost atrophied, it had been that long. The smooth globes met every

stroke until the sound of slapping flesh accompanied their moans in rhythm. Xander lost any thread of control. The rumbling low in his groin grew with each thrust until he had a handful of honey colored curls tangled in his left fist and he bent Spike down at the waist, yes, oh fuck, even deeper. His right hand manipulated a long, sleek limb so one leg lay over Xander's thigh and he was pumping into Spike ruthlessly, almost mindless with sensation. He saw Spike scramble to touch himself, felt the frantically jerking elbow and he groaned, the sight rushing him along faster, stronger.

"Yeah, come for me..." he moaned, not knowing if the words found voice or if they only sounded in the mass of lust that was his brain. "Spike, come, ah..."

The rapidly working elbow became erratic, disoriented, and Spike cried out, a strangled, visceral sound and cool seed splashed Xander's hand where it gripped a sharp hipbone, still pumping. Vibrations from the vampire's orgasm rippled within him and Xander wrapped his arms around the panting man, trapping him, and pushed hard, once, twice, again, then his blood exploded quicksilver and he screamed and it seemed he'd never stop shooting.

Part Three

He didn't know he passed out until he came to on his stomach, arms stretched wide on the bed. The empty bed. Lifting himself on his elbows Xander glanced around, noted it was going on one o'clock, then the coldness began in his chest like it had done often enough the past fifteen years. He rolled over and out of bed, padding naked to the stairs, noting the soreness of his legs and arms. Good, burning soreness that only came from thorough, intense sex. Nothing felt like it. He hadn't felt either way for a while.

Still he recognized the unsettled state of his nerves for the disappointment it was and told himself to grow the hell up. What? He thought the sun would keep Spike here? It had still been dark earlier. He could have booked without injury if he moved fast. He'd had plenty of one-night stands, and been both standee and stander by turns. Spike's black duffel bag was gone from the middle of the living room and he smirked sardonically. And one fuck for the road coming right

"Coffee?" The amused English accent startled an unmanly squeak out of him and he whirled around to see the vampire standing there wearing a pair of black sweat

pants that hung low on his hips and billowed around the ankles comically. Hey. Those were his sweatpants.

"What?" he blurted. Spike held up a mug with a quirked eyebrow and for a second he looked so Spike that gooseflesh ran up and down his arms like little mice.

"You drink tea." Was the incisive comment that happened next and Spike gave a small shrug.

"Couldn't find tea."

"Oh. Yeah I don't...have any."

"Right, then." The vampire said after a moment and offered the cup again. Xander took it, the delicious smell wafting over to him and making everything much better, like that smell always did.

"I didn't think you were here," he admitted and a struggling-to-be-casual-and-failing look he decided he hated came over the vampire's face. Xander walked over very close, enjoying way the summer blue eyes took in his face and rested on his mouth.

"Want to drink this upstairs?" Xander asked now that he realized last night wasn't going to end at last night.

"Sure."

Mild nod causing the curls to bob and Xander felt a stirring begin, which he severely stopped. *Uh-uh, you. No more rolls in the hay until some talking is done* and, shit on a shingle, was he talking to his DICK? "I'll get the paper and meet you up there." Spike headed for the stairs sipping at his cup, only the toes of his feet showing and Xander felt a silly smile stretch his lips at the damned cute sight of milky white vampire, baggy exercise pants and floppy dark blond hair. "Going for the fashion award there?"

"They're your pants, git." But the words sounded....shy? Nah. Couldn't be. "You planning on going outside starkers?"

"American ingenuity my British friend." Xander tried a horrible English accent. "Paper goes right in my door. I installed a mail slot."

"Just so your lazy bum won't have to walk down to the curb." Spike called over his shoulder, but heard the smile.

"Hey, I have damn fine bum!" Xander protested and Spike paused and turned on the stairs, an appraising glint in his eyes.

"I know." Xander's mouth went dry at the open lust and, okay, not easy walking with a hard on. Gah! He ran a

hand over his face as he walked over to retrieve the thick Sunday paper. He was so out of practice with this. It felt like high school all over again, hiding erection beneath desks and under baggy clothes.

By the time he got upstairs he'd gotten himself under control, and found Spike sitting, legs outstretched and cup on his lap, a faraway look on his face.

"Where'd you go?"

"Pardon?" Spike came back from wherever he'd been with a blink and looked away, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Had that thousand mile stare going." The vampire smiled and didn't answer and Xander gave a reflective nod before flopping on the bed with the L.A. Times.

"Ay! Wanker!" Spike exclaimed, holding the coffee cup steady on the jiggling mattress and Xander laughed at the chagrin on the cut glass features. Once the bed had settled down and they each had a section to hide behind: Sunday Funnies for him, World News for Spike, he spoke again.

"Regrets?" The rustling stopped and he waited behind the colorful circular, staring at Snoopy without seeing the words.

"Do I look like I have any regrets?" Spike's low smoke velvet voice sounded this side of angry and Xander put down the comics, turning to see the News section still held up like a shield. "I bloody started it."

"About that. Why?" Total silence followed and Xander doggedly continued because, hell, he wasn't a kid anymore. He didn't do don't ask don't tell, not about this. "Because if you were horny, or lonely, or whatever, fine. I just want to know the score, all right? Forewarned and all that."

"If you want me to leave just say so." Spike's tight voice came from behind the paper and Xander reached out and crumpled it out of the way. Apprehensive blue eyes met his and he again wanted to cover them with his hand to stop the pain there.

"You can't leave. I haven't even kissed you yet." Such a look of surprised pleasure overtook Spike's face Xander felt something in his chest shift. Oh, man. He had to watch himself because that was not a good sign.

Except, who cared when the beautiful blond vampire in his bed was fixated on his mouth with singular concentration? Xander's gaze fell helplessly to the perfect pink lips, parted a little, as if they were panting.

Leaning forward slowly, Xander cupped the square jaw in his hand and brought their lips together.

Chaste brush at first, giving, cool mouth and he slid his tongue along the seam, teasing. Hands fumbled at his chest, then his shoulder, as if they weren't sure where to go before sinking into his hair to mold his skull, pulling him closer, deeper, and oh. The moist cavern tasted like coffee and smoke and salt, sadness, somehow. A small sound was made, it might have been him, and he touched Spike's face, still lost in that amazing mouth. A lightheadedness began, falling, and, oops, air, forgot that, and he tore himself away with a gasp. They had ended up laying down again, somehow, the paper crumpled between their bodies, and in the middle of breathing hard, foreheads touching, eyes locked and searing, someone's stomach growled. Spike's eyebrow lifted and Xander gave a laugh of indignation.

"That wasn't me!"

Spike got a sheepish look and Xander rolled his eyes.

"Busted."

"Had to try, luv. Have a reputation to uphold and all."

"Yeah, yeah." A thought occurred to him and he sobered some. "Damn."

"What?"

"I have less than no idea where to get blood."

"Don't worry about it. I do."

"Do they deliver?" he asked, half joking and Spike nodded, laying his head on the pillow but not looking at him.

"Yeah. They do."

"Well, cool," he agreed, then moved some curls out of Spike's face, more to reconnect than because it bothered him. For some reason he'd felt the vampire start to withdraw and he wanted to bring him back. "I'll have some next time."

The impact of what he said hit them both at the same time and Spike tried to roll away with a false little smile. Xander was having none of it. Refusing to drop the suddenly unreadable blue orbs he threw a leg over a hipbone and gathered the slim man into his arms, bringing them as close as possible.

"Don't do that."

"I don't...."

"Don't zone out on me. Not an option." He saw the Adam's apple on the pale throat swallow and Spike gave a tiny nod.

"Okay," he said quietly before laying a wet smack on Spike's lips.

"Showering. Order the plasma, 'kay?" Rolling off the bed he headed to the bathroom before stopping at the look on Spike's face. Tenderness and sadness and a smile.

"What?"

"You didn't look a day over eighteen just now. You know that?"

"Spike, you already got in my pants. Overkill not necessary." Xander winked before walking in the bathroom, but he had to stand inside the shut door and clear his eyes for a minute. He didn't think he could take many more of those looks. They were going to kill him.

The pounding needles of the shower felt good and he let the water sluice over him, eyes closed, images of last night, or this morning, overtaking his mind. They'd been there since he woke up. He'd been walking around half hard, and if he could release some tension here, in the privacy of his own shower, he'd be able to keep from attacking the vampire every five minutes.

Reaching for the shampoo he lathered and rinsed his hair and was in the middle of washing his body with one of those plastic scrunchies when he heard the door open. The draft from the room made his skin rash with goose pimples and he called out.

"Spike? Everything all right?"

"Fine," came the low reply and whatever else Xander might have said fled as the door to the shower opened and Spike stepped in.

He'd felt that body in the dark, saw the hard chest and lined stomach, and his mind had developed a fixation on the curve of hipbone just above the waist of the black sweatpants, but he'd never seen the whole thing. Stepping back his eyes devoured the perfection before him as the vampire stepped under the spray, head thrown back, rivulets of water making gossamer trails in and out, down and around the muscled form. Xander lost the battle for control and his cock bobbed heavily, pre-cum already leaking from the head and all he was doing was watching Spike run his hands through the honey blond curls, sheened flat with water.

He made some sound, something inarticulate and rough and Spike opened his eyes, blinking droplets out of them.

The sky blue took in Xander from head to toe but all he said was. "Shampoo."

With numb fingers he handed over the shampoo bottle and Spike lathered his hair and rinsed, eyes closed, hands moving the strands around until the water ran clear. Xander felt almost impaled, he was so hard, but at the same time he didn't want to stop watching the otherworldly creature in his shower. It was simply the most erotic, stunning sight he'd ever seen.

Spike finally opened his eyes and, looking deeply in Xander's, he ran both hands over his chest, pulling at wet, stiff nipples, over slender rib cage and hard torso and one hand circled himself, oh look, hard cock, and drew the foreskin slowly up revealing the shining tip.

Xander lost it. With a growl he pulled the vampire in his arms, kissing him deeply, moaning at his taste. Spike gripped his ass with both hands, pressing their groins together, the water making them slide sensuously and Xander had to break the kiss to moan. "Tease," he muttered hoarsely, his hands trying to feel everywhere at once, greedy for Spike, when he felt himself pushed against the cold tile of the shower hard enough to make him grunt. Spike held him there, wicked smile on his damp features.

"No, pet. I deliver." The vampire dropped to his knees before Xander knew what happened and then oh god, Jesus, GOD as Spike enveloped the head of his weeping erection with a cool, wet mouth.

Xander closed his eyes, breathing shallowly, hands scrabbling against the slick surface of the tile as Spike sucked the sensitive head of his cock, then deep throated him in a move that almost made his knees buckle. Firm hands spread his legs farther and Xander felt knowing fingers roll his scrotum around, continue south to play at his entrance. Evil, talented mouth nibbling and licking at him and he finally had to see, had been trying not to for fear he'd come too fast, but he had to. Opening his eyes he saw his cock engulfed in that pink mouth, cheekbones in high relief as Spike moved back and forth and when he thought he'd die from the sight, the starry lashes lifted and blazing molten blue looked back at him, through him. With a whimper Xander thrust his hips, back hunching over the vampire. His hands gripped wet blond hair and pulled and he was fucking Spike's mouth in fierce, scalding strokes, over and over and Jesus, it felt incredible.

"Coming, Spike, coming..." he tried to moan. The mouth on his pulsing flesh took him gullet deep and a finger slipped in his rectum, hard. The world exploded in a burst

of color as he shot load after load, unable to stop, and Spike took them all.

Crumpling down the tile Xander tried to catch his breath as he sat on the floor of the shower, nerve endings still screaming from his orgasm. Reaching out he enfolded Spike to his chest, kissing the damp forehead, eyes, mouth, hands holding the sharp cheekbones. Summer blue eyes met his and widened as Xander's hand slipped between muscled thighs and found the weeping red head that made him lose control.

"Ah-hah," he whispered with a smile.

"You don't have to. 'M fine." Spike mumbled, but his lashes fluttered as Xander fisted his hand around the pulsing length, pumping.

"I want to taste you," he said in the delicate shell of ear and Spike quivered, gripping his arm hard enough to bruise.

"Not lasting....that long....Xander...." Hearing the musk and smoke voice grate out the words all disjointed began to harden him again, and Xander ignored it, pumping faster, watching the play of desire on the perfect features.

"Tell me when," his lips whispered into Spike's ear then bestowed a quick lick on the lobe, nibbling. "Tell me when you come, Spike."

"Close, uh..." The blue eyes became unfocused as Xander sped up, arm a blur of movement. "Nearly there...."

"Now," he commanded in a whisper, running a thumb savagely over the leaking head and Spike jerked his neck back, quaking as come flooded Xander's hand and wrist.

"Ye...essss." Spike's moan made the word a drawn out surrender, and Xander kept stroking until the tremors subsided and the body in his arms lay limp and boneless.

"Come on," he said after rinsing his hand on the faucet. He gently helped them both up, and caught Spike when the vampire stumbled. Actually Spike looked decidedly wan after their exertions and Xander held him close, smoothing the damp curls as they stood in the rapidly cooling water.

"Hey. You doing all right? I'm not that good."

"Fine." Spike mumbled into his chest and Xander gave his shoulders a squeeze, walking them out of the shower stall.

"Did you call about the blood?"

"Yeah. Ordered it for tonight.."

"Good." He slipped into a pair of jeans and watched Spike curl up on the still unmade bed, eyes closing, then snapping open, struggling to stay awake.

"Go on." Xander said, walking over to smooth the blond hair out of the sleepy features. "I'll wake you up when the stuff's here."

"Money in duster." Spike muttered.

"Got it." Xander said. Spike was breathing, or not breathing, deeply by the time he reached the stairs.

Part Four

Walking into the living room the tranquil sanctuary of his home settled around him and he felt simple contentment. It had taken him a long time to get over the feeling he was playing dress up with Wils: she was the mommy, he the daddy and no one yelled at little Barbie or G.I. Joe because the toys hadn't been picked up

or a beer hadn't been gotten quick enough. The comfortable home was his, the well paying, steady job he enjoyed was his. His father had never had any of those things, and spent much of Xander's life prophesizing Xander wouldn't either. *Proved you wrong, motherfucker*, he thought, before erasing any more childhood memories.

There was a reason no pictures of his parents graced his mantle.

Rooting around his cupboards for something to tide him over he found a box of vaguely stale Ritz crackers and flipped the tab on a Coke. He had to get some real food in here, man. He could not believe Spike wasn't going for his jugular despite the chip. He used to watch the vampire devour an entire pizza and chicken wings by the dozen, in addition to the blood. Spike hadn't eaten last night, and it was going on three now.

On his way to the living room he caught sight of himself on the wall mirror. Serious bed head, mouthful of crumbs and lips full and swollen from kissing. Kissing Spike.

Stone the fucking crows.

If anyone would have told him last week he'd be in this predicament he would have asked them to please not

smoke that shit around him. But the feel of that firm, soft satin skin in his arms short-circuited all his reasoning. And continued to short-circuit it. He'd invited a vampire into his house for Christ's sake. Said vampire was curled up like a kitten on his bed after mind-blowing sex that still had his body walking around in a constant state of arousal. Note to self: never go more than a year without getting laid; wigs out your self-control.

The best cure for that, as far as he knew, was work. Fetching his backpack from the hall closet, because he'd never wanted a briefcase and you couldn't take those on site, he sat at the table to look over the specs for next week's appointments. When the sun dipped beyond the horizon he called in his food order, and doubled it.

His Chinese food and Spike's blood arrived within minutes of each other and he had a tricky moment as he tipped Jimmy, the delivery boy from The Shanghai Flower while the demon with the Styrofoam cooler stood in the shadows. He knew it was a demon, all his long forgotten instincts prickled like gangbusters.

"Thanks, man." He waved to the kid as Jimmy headed back to his beat to shit Toyota, and the person hiding in his bushes stepped into the light.

He would have looked human except for the pale blue skin tone and the vertical pupils. "How much do I owe you?" Xander asked, placing the warm Chinese food on the hall table. The demon told him. Xander peeled off bills from his wallet and the demon gave him the cooler. When Xander checked inside, which the delivery demon seemed to expect, he only saw two bags. "That's it?"

"Inflation, man. Talk to Geech. I just work there."

"No." Xander shook his head. He figured the price of blood had gone up, like everything else. "Is that all he ordered?"

"Yeah. Got it right here." He dug in the pockets of faded jeans and produced a yellow receipt from which he read. "Two bags O-Neg, Mr. The Bloody. That you?"

Xander gave him a mirthless smile. "No. Bring back two more."

"Don't work that way, dude. I got deliveries all over the place..."

"This dead president says you're a flexible young...."

Xander surveyed him, "Guy. More if you get it here in an hour." The bill disappeared in the faded jeans and Xander watched the guy hot foot it to the moped parked at the

curb. Hell of thing to carry blood in, but who was he to judge.

Setting the blood and food in the kitchen he walked up the stairs.

Spike hadn't moved from his fetal position, and Xander knelt next to the bed, smoothing stubborn curls once again off the closed eyes. *Jesus Christ, he was so fucking beautiful. Had he always been this beautiful?*

"Spike. Chow time. Hey, buddy." Xander whispered. Sleepy blue eyes fluttered open and the vampire gave him a vague smile before stretching like a lean, white cat. Xander bent down and caught the mid yawn in a kiss that deepened and drew him in until he had to forcefully pull away with a wry laugh. "Uh-uh. Food first. Tonsil hockey later."

"Who kissed who, ay?" Spike asked, but he sat up, scratching the pattern of rib cage before swinging his legs off the bed. Slipping on Xander's black sweat pants again Spike followed him down the stairs.

They milled around the kitchen as he found plates for the Moo Goo Gai Pan, Kung Pao Chicken, Fried Rice and Egg drop soup and Spike scared up another mug to heat his blood. They'd almost finished the meal, with Xander

making good-natured faces every time Spike used the blood like dipping sauce, when the doorbell rang. The vampire started so bad he knocked over Xander's glass of soda.

"Whoah. Jumpy much?" Xander stopped the fizzy liquid from reaching the edge of the table with a napkin and Spike jumped up to grab the roll of paper towels.

"Sorry." Spike muttered, wiping up the spill as Xander rose to get the door. "You expecting company?"

"Yeah," he called over his shoulder.

Demon delivery boy stood panting at his door, another disposable cooler in hand. "See, I knew you were a resourceful boy." Xander smiled as the wad of bills disappeared into the faded jeans.

"You were right. Geech said to give you our card with my cell for faster service. We also have spell supplies. You know, Keva innards, Fyarl spleen,"

"And way too much of the information there, dude, but thanks." Xander took the cooler and card and nodded goodnight to a tip of Demon Boy's cap.

"Who was...."? Spike stopped as soon as he saw the cooler Xander placed on the kitchen table. Suspicion

clouded his brow as Xander removed the two extra bags and he didn't like it immediately. "I didn't order those."

"I did. Two isn't enough, and you're about to fade away to nothing, in case you hadn't noticed."

"One shag and you're my soddin' nursemaid now?"
Xander froze from where he'd bent over the fridge to put the bags up, then stood and looked at Spike.

"No," he said patiently, as he began gathering up the remains of their meal. "A shag AND a blowjob. It's in the fuck buddy handbook. Didn't you know?"

Dead silence followed and he grabbed Tupperware containers from the cabinets and began to scoop up leftovers with jerky movements. So much for morals exing out the asshole factor.

Gentle, cool hand on his back stopped his actions. He hadn't even heard Spike move. "Xander." Regretful, velvet voice, and what kind of a lightweight was he that the sound of his name in that voice went straight to his crotch?

Firm fingertips traveled their way up to the slope of his shoulders targeting the knots in his muscles, and heat flushed through him like a full-bodied fever. The surface of the counter on his palms was suddenly the coolest

thing on him apart from those mesmerizing fingers, and Xander shut his eyes at the unbelievable skill and strength in Spike's hands. In minutes Xander thought he might melt into a puddle of Jell-O on the floor, and that didn't even make sense. Hadn't they been arguing? His mind struggled to pick up the thread of the conversation that had slid away under the ministrations of the vampire's massage. Damn, this wasn't fair. And fuck, he was half hard again.

Turning, Xander slipped his arms around the slim waist and Spike's linked his wrists loosely on Xander's shoulders. They looked at each other for a while, searching for answers to questions not yet asked. So he asked one. "Is that what this is?"

"I don't...I didn't..." Spike faltered then glared at him with exasperated baby blues. "That was your word not mine."

"I'm not your nursemaid."

Spike averted his eyes, then closed them as Xander began rubbing circles in the slender lower back. He could feel the vertebra too close beneath the muscles, felt the body in his arms loosen and lean on him a little.

"I know I don't look like I did." Spike mumbled stiffly and Xander slipped a hand around a cool, pale neck.

"Hey." The sooty lashes lifted. Tracing the smooth chest down to the curve of bone that had him so fascinated Xander gripped the curvature of hip with both hands and gently swayed into Spike, breath catching at the answering hardness. He'd meant to say something, some platitude to tell Spike how beautiful he still was, how the way his skin felt made Xander want to sink in and get lost, but his throat closed up with the heat emanating from their rubbing erections. Spike lifted up on the balls of his feet, lips hovering, teasing around Xander's mouth until Xander latched onto the tantalizing lips, pulling and tasting.

And always this feeling of falling when he kissed Spike, floating in textures with the top of his head about to spin off, again with the forgetting to breathe. Laughing he pulled away despite Spike's hands cupping his face, bringing him nearer. "I'm going to pass out."

"I'll catch you." The vampire murmured, blunt teeth nipping at his lips but Xander pulled back, still chuckling, then noted the faint irritation of red around the pink mouth. He rubbed a finger on the fading blotches. By way of an answer Spike touched his goatee with one nimble hand.

"Sorry. Guess I could shave...."

"Sod that." Spike interrupted with real menace in his voice despite the smile. "Looks good on you, it does. Look like a man. I like it."

"Good." Xander said. He'd been surprised how differently people treated him after growing the trim beard, and how many tried to pick him up. To his discomfort both the men and women who had begun to notice him were extremely young. After one date, when the apple cheeked boy who'd asked him out referred to nineties music as 'oldies', he stopped accepting all THOSE propositions.

They made short work of the dishes, Xander opting not to turn on the dishwasher for the few plates and glasses and he caught himself watching Spike's ass as the vampire bent over to put away the detergent.

Dirty old guy, he chided himself, then realized the irony of that thought. Spike was, and would always be, one hundred twenty years older than himself. He would just always look twenty-something, and a young twenty something, suspended forever thanks to being turned in the first flush of youth. Before the soul his age had been in his eyes, though. Hard, cynical, calculating in turns, the pale blue showed every decade if one cared to look.

Something about the naked vulnerability and that damned hair made him seem much younger now.

"Wanna go to a movie?" he asked, trying not to sound a trifle desperate because if he didn't get them out for some air, at least a little bit, he was going to come his brains right out of his dick, and this was getting ridiculous. Holding his eyes, Spike leaned slowly back on the counter on his elbows, the move throwing his clavicles into high definition, bunching up the muscles in his stomach to firm, marble ridges above the low, low elastic of the sweatpants. Xander's jeans tightened, again and he shook his head, looking away with a laugh. "Help me out here."

"I'll bet you have bloody fantastic cable. What d'you want to go out for?"

"Popcorn? Previews?" He approached the still leaning vampire and slipped an arm around a slim waist, running a hand over the sculpted, pale chest. "I wanna show off my hot date maybe?"

"Right." Spike scoffed, but the summer blue was soft again. It was as if he couldn't quite keep up the posing for longer than a few minutes before the façade fell and all emotion showed transparently in his eyes. "Come out to all your mates 'ave you?"

"A few." Xander shrugged, earning a genuinely searching look from Spike.

"You're serious."

"It's L.A." Xander said. "PC central. They're a good bunch of guys. After I was fixed up with all the sisters, nieces, friends and nothing took they kind of figured..."

"Didn't fancy them, ay?" Spike's head cocked and he traced designs on Xander's chest with the very edge of his fingers.

"Well, you know." Xander replied regretfully. "Was saving myself for the evil undead of my dreams."

Spike snorted but a smile curved the pink lips, a real smile, not a sneer, or a smirk, or a grin dripping with sexuality. He still couldn't get used to that. Couldn't get used to so many things. Reaching up to cup Spike's jaw with his palm he dropped a chaste kiss on those lips.

"Come on. You can pick the movie."

"Whatever I want, ay?"

"Yeah," he admitted, belatedly wondering at the many dubious movies Spike could want. He could always claim not to know any porn theaters.

"Deal."

~*~*~*~*~

"I can't believe we watched that." Xander said as they left the crowded theater.

"Why not? Thought it was a fine film."

"For a six year old." He moved aside as a harried mother herded four kids all under the age of six out the door. The place had teemed with children and their parents and a few teen-age girls who kept giving Spike the eye. "I mean, Lilo and Stitch?"

"Listen to 'im." Spike rolled his eyes. "I lived with you, mate. Know all about your precious comic book collection under the bed."

"Hey! That's different! Those are collectors' items and....they'remanly.....comics."

"Funny picture are funny pictures, luv."

"Listen, you...."

"Alex?" A surprised voice sounded from behind them and Xander turned in the sea of humanity to find one of his

co-workers making his way towards them with a pony tailed little girl in the crook of one arm and a tow-headed little boy holding the other.

"Patrick. Hey." He smiled, casually nabbing the back of Spike's duster before he could fade away in the crowd. He could feel the discomfort in the vampire, but Patrick had been completely cool about Xander's bisexuality. He could see the curiosity on his co-worker's face at his companion and couldn't really blame him. When he'd come downstairs from changing he'd almost nixed the whole movie idea in favor of attacking Spike anyway. The vampire had changed to new looking painted on black jeans, shiny black shirt and silver chain choker. They made a pretty odd pair. "This is Spike, a friend from back home. Spike, Patrick. We work together."

"Pleasure." Spike shook the hand Patrick held out after shifting his daughter to his left arm.

"Likewise. This is Megan and Mitch. Say 'hello' guys. You remember Alex from the barbecue."

"Hello." Mitch repeated, holding out his hand in a parody of his father, brown eyes earnest beneath the blond bangs. "You have a funny name."

"Mitchell!" His father exclaimed but Spike just grinned and shook the small hand offered to him.

"Sharp lad. It's William, actually, but don't tell anyone."

"You have a coat like that guy in the Matrix."

"Mine's cooler, ay?"

More reticent Megan hid in her father's arms and peered out shyly at the two men, a small fist partially in her mouth.

"Never figured you for a Disney watcher." Patrick laughed and Xander gave Spike a sidelong glare.

"You know me. All about feeding the inner child."

"I wanted to watch The Sum of All Fears, but he insisted on the cartoon." Spike shrugged with wide-eyed puzzlement and Xander rubbed the bridge of his nose in discretion. "He's really a big kid at heart, isn't he?"

"Got you busted now, man." Patrick kidded and Xander nodded good-naturedly.

"Yeah. My rep is shot."

After some talk about the conference Xander had decided not to attend Megan began to fidget and Patrick

took his leave. Waving, as they headed for their separate cars Xander scowled at Spike's laughing eyes. "You are so dead."

"Well, yeah." Throwing an arm around Spike's shoulders Xander growled and they stumbled laughing to the car.

NIGHT

Cold in the dark and he murmured, reaching out for the soft, cool body he'd gone to sleep holding.

They'd returned to the apartment later than usual due to a traffic jam and Spike drifted off in front of the late news, not even protesting when Xander hefted him up to carry him up to bed. He thought Spike got tired a lot faster than he remembered, but maybe it was jet lag, or something. He'd read in bed for a while until he got sleepy, then tucked himself around the sleeping vampire, hugging him like a pillow, and it was scary how fast he'd gotten used to this presence in his bed.

Which was nowhere to be found now, no matter how far he reached or how broad his search.

"Spike?" he mumbled, lifting up on an elbow, blinking sleep out of his eyes, and there: a sound. Looking towards the bathroom he noticed the sliver of light

under the door and swung his legs quickly off the bed. He recognized that sound with the immediacy and intimacy of a deeply ingrained childhood memory: his father after a four day bender, his uncle after New Year's Eve, upheaval of someone being violently ill. He thought of knocking for only a second before opening the door, and the scent of sickness washed over him in a thick wave.

Two steps brought him to the naked figure hunched over the commode, the vertebra and ribs stark in the harsh overhead light, faint blue veins visible under parchment skin. Another retch shook Spike and Xander knelt beside him, knees cold on the linoleum, and lay a hand on his back, rubbing.

For several minutes Xander just rubbed the vampire's back, soothing, slow circles like his grandmother used to do to him, and tried not to be too freaked out at the splashes of brilliant red painting the inside of the toilet crimson. Did vampire's hemorrhage? Who the hell did he call for this if they did? There was so much blood; he didn't even think Spike drank as much as had gutted out of him. After a couple of more times the vampire lay his head on the side of the rim exhausted.

"M sorry."

"Don't be stupid," he whispered, reaching over to flush. If the blood had gone over, and he got his hands on Mr. Delivery Demon, the smurf reject was going to be sorry he ever graced his doorstep.

"It's not the blood." Spike said as if reading his mind, voice hoarse and weak, eyes shut in a face so pale it looked ashen, and that had to be hard to achieve on a vampire. "'S me. Stomach's been....acting up."

"You okay for a while? Think you can get up?" Xander asked and Spike swallowed, pushed himself off the commode with effort. He slipped an arm around his shoulders and slowly lifted the body up and, Jesus, so light. He was beginning to realize it wasn't just how much stronger he'd gotten since Sunnydale. Cool flesh almost inconsequential in it's frailty. *What the hell happened to you Spike?* he thought as they began to walk slowly. *Why won't you tell me?*

"Brush teeth." Spike said in the same raspy tone and Xander stopped in front of the sink where Spike used his extra toothbrush, thought if he lived to be a hundred he'd never get used to Spike having no reflection in the mirror.

Once they reached the bed and he set the vampire down gingerly Xander pulled the comforter up to Spike's chin,

and than just knelt there, looking at the closed eyes and disheveled hair.

"Is this why you didn't want more blood?" he asked. Spike opened his eyes to slits and nodded. Sighing, Xander shrouded himself over the vampire and kissed the curls still damp from the exertion.

"You could have just told me. Why didn't you?" he whispered into a smooth, soft temple.

"'Cause I'm a git." Spike whispered sleepily. Xander couldn't disagree with that, and Spike was seconds away from sleep once more, anyhow. Crawling in behind him Xander wrapped both arms around the vampire, over the fetal position he'd taken to sleeping in, and wasn't that strange, now that he thought about it? The vampire made a sighing sound and snuggled back into Xander's lap, but his nether regions were behaving themselves just fine. The image of all that blood spurting from Spike's thin body hadn't quite left.

No more late night trips to the bathroom were necessary but it was still a while before Xander could sleep.

Part Five

They did wake up together then, by degrees, stretching and yawning. Xander had to pee and by the time he got back out Spike had sat up in bed blinking and rubbing his eyes in an astoundingly child-like gesture.

They wandered into the kitchen where he nuked the leftover Chinese food. Spike warmed up some blood and they sat in companionable silence sharing the Sunday Times. Spike propped his feet on Xander's lap, absorbed in the paper, and he was really going to have to give him those sweatpants. He looked around himself.

The afternoon had that lazy feeling he'd grown to love because he'd never had it before. No warm, fuzzy Sunday afternoons in the Harris household, and Anya simply was not a sleep late person, always up at first light, buzzing and frenetic, rushing around talking a mile a minute. It hit him then, fully, how different Spike had become in that respect, because pre-souled Spike had some serious ADHD going on: tapping fingers, jiggling foot, prowling around when he had to sit still more than thirty minutes. In a moment of epiphany he'd realized how hard it must have been for the vampire to be tied up in the bathtub, or on his lawn chair in the basement. Spike had always been about pent up, coiled energy, sleek and dangerous, like a panther.

But not this Spike. No nervous thrumming, no foot tapping, just calm, paper in one fine boned hand, mug of blood in the other, honey blond hair tousled into his eyes. Spike glanced up and was Xander ever going to get used to the clear, guileless blue of them? An inquisitive smile curved the corners of the perfect mouth up and Xander put down the paper to start rubbing the feet on his lap, just to touch him again.

"Anything you want to do today?" Spike's gaze traveled down his body and Xander felt his stomach clench at that indecent, speculative look. "Besides that. You of the one track mind." Spike's foot, the one not in his hand, gave a toe at his crotch and Xander jumped as the thin fabric of his nylon shorts rubbed against...well, hell.

"You were saying?"

"I was saying that's fighting dirty."

"Nancy boy." But the teasing foot moved away and Xander shifted in relief. Spike put the paper on the table and stretched, cat-like still despite being cured of the twitchies along the way. "Thought I'd watch some telly, see if I can find some football on your bazillion cable channels. Not up for much else, it bein' daylight and all."

"Just didn't want you bored, Fangless. I've got some work to finish up."

"No fear." Spike shrugged and emptied the mug. "Could use some down time."

"Yeah?" He stood up and began to gather dishes.

"Recovering from-- where is it you were?" He hadn't realized it sounded like fishing until the words hung in the silent air and he bit his lip where he stood at the sink scraping moo goo gai pan scraps down the disposal and flipping the switch. That bought him a few seconds of time before the silence descended again, and he inwardly sighed. *Come on, Spike, give me something so I don't feel like I have to pry it out of you with a crowbar.*

"Budapest." The answer came, finally, actually sounded casual. *And hide the relief, too, Harris.*

"Is that where Drusilla is?" he asked turning back to the table, and felt his stomach sink at the pinched discomfort on those features that didn't match the collected voice.

Spike nodded, getting up to wash his mug, but Xander plucked it from his fingers with an encouraging smile.

"That's where she moved on, yeah."

He's lying, the thought materialized in his head, and he ignored it as he washed out the cup to put on the

drainage rack. He didn't know that. Didn't know any such thing. He hadn't seen Spike for fifteen years, what made him think he could read the vampire that well? Arrogant much?

Pale blue veined arms around his waist and silken chest at his back and Xander stroked the forearms. He felt Spike lay his head at the nape of his neck and had to turn around to hold him properly. Such a serious look in those blue eyes. "Getting that heavy feeling again. Want to share?"

"No. Not really." Spike answered neutrally and Xander nodded, letting it go with some effort. Something had happened, something to do with the bruised sorrow in those eyes. Sometimes he felt he could physically touch the thing between them.

Spike watched him for a few moments before reaching up and brushing his morning shadow with the back of a hand. "I'm here. I want you. That enough?"

"Yeah." Xander said softly, turning to kiss a smooth-rough palm. "It's enough." *For now.* He swallowed the slim vampire in his arms, cupping Spike's skull with one hand, felt the man give a sigh and relax. He watched infinitesimal dust particles dust in the light of a small patch of sunlight, and held his vampire for a while.

The afternoon passed, lazy and peaceful. Xander laid out his work for the next week focusing on two presentation bids he'd compiled regarding the insulation for new commercial buildings. Every once in a while he'd glance over his shoulder to where Spike lay on the couch idly flicking channels. Once he heard cheering and saw Spike put the remote down, settling in for some soccer. Settling calmly in, which was all kinds of wrong, but he couldn't really say that, could he? He'd only ever watched one soccer game on TV with Spike while the vampire lived in the basement with him, and he didn't know how Spike even heard anything, so preoccupied was he with yelling and cheering, and insulting the official's ancestry. The still figure watching the game was only another thing that was different, apart, not right to the Spike he'd known.

Of course he'd never have taken that Spike to bed, right? *Sure, Harris, kid yourself*, he thought, snorting. Who took the initiative that morning? They'd be ice-skating in hell before he would have put move one on Spike of his own accord. Not that he exactly fought too hard when said move was done to him....

Cool palms on the nape of his neck made him jump and he smiled as they moved down his chest to rub slowly on the stiff peaks of his nipples. "I'm gonna get you a bell...."

And no more talking, his mouth too full of tongue and teeth and moist, copper velvet. Desire unraveled like string, looping off faster and faster and oh, yes, petal soft muscle, naked Spike in his hands, springy honey curls tangled in his fingers as he clenched in them, ground the thrusting cavern in so hard teeth clicked, stronger tang of copper.

Spike pulled away panting, blue eyes dark as twilight and stain of alizarin on his lips. Bloody lipstick.

"Sorry." Xander whispered, concerned, then watched, riveted, as a pink tongue peeked out, lapped at the moisture, and he pulled Spike to him again, too rough, sorry, but oh, swirling explosion of taste and mewling, whimpery sounds, which one, and suddenly the cool muscle climbed onto him, fitted in his lap like it was made for it. His hands grabbed slim hips, curve of bone he loved, too hard, man, but he couldn't seem to pull back, rein in, every intention evaporating like so much smoke.

Fuck him, he wanted to fuck him so bad as he watched that face take it, oh God. One hand groped feverishly between them as the other held onto that fragile neck, holding Spike close, only parting to steal gasps of air around the nipping, biting lips. Fingers found his, tube

slipped in and he'd laugh but the burning relief wasn't funny right now. Flick, coat, tossed the tube aside without closing it and weight on his legs was suddenly lighter, lifted. Even while kissing he knew, could picture it: Spike using the table as leverage, every bicep and deltoid bulging as he allowed Xander room to reach into the damp confines of his shorts, pull himself free. The touch of his own fingers nearly sent him over, pushed a moan through his teeth because the skin was so sensitive, felt like he'd been hard forever, and maybe he had. Waiting for this, he hadn't even realized, so fucking beautiful....

Tight, tight sheath on his cock and he gasped, mauled the skin of Spike's hips helplessly because oh, Jesus, oh....gravity and physics and weight and the slightly lifted knees, and the vampire worked himself on Xander's hardness, bouncing, rocking, taking him inch by inch and watching emotions run across that face had him holding onto control by the barest sliver.

Little wincing, wide, wide blue eyes and panting, parted lips. Xander pushed down with his hands, felt quivering globes through the bunched up nylon of his shorts and the blue was very, very wide, knuckles almost white, whiter, on the table.

"Okay? Spike?" He had to pant around the heart in his throat. "Talk...to me..."

"Can't..." Ragged voice sounded lost and it stripped the last vestige of reserve he had. Pumping on him, hands gripping bruises on the pale flesh, had to be, but so good, Jesus, and slouched lower in the chair to go deeper, angled hips, there, and Spike jerked on top of him, again, rode faster in the heat and motion nothing existed but this, in, in, uh.... Spike scrambled for the erection leaking all over Xander's stomach and he pushed the hand away, dark, thrill at the sobbing moan of desperation that keened into pleasure when he fisted the turgid cock, snug channel. Down on him, up into him and he surrounded Spike, was surrounded by him, felt a vibration, a clenching begin.

"Tell me," he gritted out, willed the sooty lashes to open so he could see, and must have heard him, yes. "Talk to me." But Spike couldn't, no words, just torn, airless breathing, and hard moans, and the trembling intensified, good, because Xander was on borrowed seconds here, not much longer...

Spike turned away. Strained away, cords of his neck outlined and quivering and Xander's blinked in confusion, hand leaving a pistoning hip to move the fine jaw back.

Jerk of the head, fall of curls hiding Spike's face and Xander mumbled. "No." Tried again, more twisting away. "No!" Gripped the cut glass cheekbone hard and forced, and Spike went this time. Feral golden eyes collided with his, ridged brow and razor sharp fangs. Holding the yellow eyes his hand outlined the territory, lashes fluttered over molten eyes and when his fingers moved over Spike's mouth they were sucked in deep.

The orgasm ripped through him viciously, shocking and fast, every nerve exploding and he yelled, shot powerfully into the binding flesh. Spike growled, thready and desperate then startled Xander by laying back on the table, taut outline of rib cage like some alabaster sculpture, arms outstretched over all his papers and notebooks, the rigid, unsheathed cock an offering against his midriff. He fisted it, pumped twice, hard, and Spike howled, back arching and quivering as cool seed splashed them both. Slower, slower, still.

They panted, breath still not caught. Xander carefully lifted the prone body upright, then against him, wrapping his arms around the slim shoulders and Spike curled onto his chest, face tucked into his neck. Molding the skull with one hand, loved how he could do that, he pressed his lips to the damp curls and whispered into them. "Why did you look away?"

Body instantly tense on top of him and he sat Spike back up he could look in the apprehensive blue, but Spike wouldn't meet his eyes until he pushed the curls away. Such hurt in there and he touched one perfect cheekbone. "Embarrassin' innit?" Rough, low voice. The annoyance fell flat, more anxiety in there than anything. "I could control it, before....before the soul thing..."

"I like it." Xander said, and suddenly his own voice dipped down, flush staining his face and Spike stared at him with such open wonder his insides turned over. Too much, too bald that, and it made him want to devour the pink mouth all over again, crawl inside the satin skin and never leave. "It's you."

God his eyes, the look in them. All of a sudden, the blue was too bright and he hugged him then, too tight, but vampire's don't need air, so what of it. They sat there, damp and sticky and warm, cocooned in each other as the shadows grew, and night stole over the horizon.

Part Six

LATER

He fought sleep, even though he didn't really know why. Spike lay tucked under his arm; leg thrown over his thigh, slim white hand resting possessively on his chest and the sense of contentment cloaked him like a cloud. He hadn't felt this comfortable with anyone in a long time.

Comfortable enough to lay over the tangled comforter naked to the world, because embers still seemed to flicker just below his skin even hours after the kitchen table episode, and several more episodes after they came upstairs to 'rest'; as if his heated skin couldn't cool down. His hands seemed unable to stop touching Spike, long, slow, repetitive, strokes: down over shoulder blades and smooth line of spine, up over muscle and skin, stroke through silken honey curls, down again. A steady purr vibrated against his chest and Xander hadn't teased the vampire about it because he didn't want it to stop. He didn't want any of it to stop, which should have been scary, but wasn't.

A yawn worked its way up and he stretched through it, cuddling Spike closer, eliciting a throaty murmur, a shift deeper against Xander's body, like a puppy seeking warmth. He smiled and rolled the lighter man on top of him, grinning at the sleepy blue eyes blinking beneath

floppy curls. Spike felt like a smooth, cool blanket and his hands dipped to the curved swell of hip beneath the muscular back, fit his fists into the indentations there and felt an answering hardness that made him groan, head turning into the pillow.

"Oh, man, I can't. I've got work tomorrow. One more time and I won't be able to walk."

"Whadja expect, hm?" Spike asked, the picture of innocence from where his chin propped up on his folded hands, a lock of hair hiding one heavy lidded sky blue eye, whisky and velvet voice husky "Takin' liberties with a blokes privates like that."

"Okay, my bad. Hand action limited to strictly above the waist. Better?"

" 'Spose." Spike murmured, lids drooping dark lashes on a pale cheek. Xander ran both palms up the muscled back, molded the shoulder blades, buried his hands in the tousled hair. The low purring began again and he laughed lightly, pulling the waves away from the peaceful features. The hair was almost long enough to pull into a ponytail, and the direction that took him was not helping him not have a hard on. Spike looked so young with his eyes closed, face all sharp angles, a tarnished angel, and

Xander wondered, not the first time, what the hell this creature was doing in his bed.

"You are so fucking beautiful," he whispered, unable to help himself; watched a small smile lift one side of the pink lips.

"Bet you say that to all the boys."

"Nah. Just the ones I wanna have sex with."

"Pillock." Spike intoned without opening his eyes and Xander laughed softly, continuing to card his hands through the silky strands. "Bet you 'ad a regular harem going. Xander's house of luu-uurve."

"Right," he scoffed. "Just call me big poppa. Or bi-poppa. Or whatever," he finished finally as Spike began to snuffle on top of him, and the sight of that smile, that open, delighted smile still made him reel, made his heart do a little flutter. "Not so much," he continued absently. "Dated a few guys, but I've been pretty anti-date the last year."

"Someone break your 'eart then?" Spike asked his eyes still calmly shut.

"Nope." Xander twirled a lock of hair around his finger. "I think the official Oprah phrase is 'emotionally unavailable.'"

"You or them?"

"Me."

Spike grunted in acknowledgement and it was good, the eyes-closed thing, because he hadn't meant to stroll down the memory lane of all his failed relationships, but ambling down the rocky path they were. Then again, in the quid-pro-quo spirit he could ask Spike some private dirt, but found himself reluctant to do so. The state he'd found the vampire in didn't exactly speak of naked freaky hijinks.

While he stroked through the bouncy silk the pads of his fingers grazed over a bump in the skull, hidden beneath all the strands. No, not a bump, a scar, puckered line of skin that began just above the last vertebra and continued up, fading as the rounded cranium began. Curious, he traced the imperfection.

"What's this?" The rest of the words cut off like the rumble of purring on his chest, abrupt and total, and Spike's eyes blinked open. They stared at each other in

silence as awareness passed between them, gained purchase.

Spike flew off the bed so fast Xander's hands actually held empty air. His body had barely registered the loss of the cool weight, and Spike was suddenly across the room, pressed to the wall, the most awful look on his face. Xander could see him fighting for any other expression besides terror and failing horribly. The urge to run over and cover the blue eyes came upon him so strong he actually sat up, but froze when Spike took a step towards the door.

For long seconds they stared at each other without moving, the only sound in the room Spike's rapid breathing. Finally he whispered "Spike?" and saw the vampire jump at the sound of his own name. "Spike? Talk to me. I'm right here."

"Course you're right there. 'M not blind." Spike retorted almost inaudibly, robbing the words of any toughness at all. The summer blue eyes kept darting away around the room, skipping away each time he got close to meeting them.

He slowly swung his legs off the bed and stood, never taking his eyes off Spike because if the vampire decided to bolt he might not be fast enough to stop him. Not

after marathon sex and the state of total relaxation he'd been in. THEY'D been in, but every shred of that had disappeared, leaving the room electric with tension.

"What was that?" Xander asked quietly and Spike shrugged, a jerking, graceless move.

"Nothin'."

"Not nothing." Spike swallowed, he saw the delicate Adam's apple bob, and he stared unblinking into the wide, scared eyes. "How did you get the scar?" Spike tried to look away, he could see the chin turning, but he wouldn't let Spike's gaze go, not for a second. Part of him hated that he caused the panicked, deer-in-the-headlights look in those beautiful eyes, but most of him bore mercilessly into the frantic stare, through it. He tried again, kept his voice calm, low "How did..."

"No." Spike said as if he'd contradicted something. Fine tremors began to shake the slim body. "No."

"Just talk to me," he whispered, reaching out, heart breaking a little at the flinch on Spike's face. "Spike, come on..."

"No!" The word snarled from his lover's throat, ragged and inhuman, and Xander froze, watching aquiline features melt into ridges and fangs, ocean blue bled

yellow gold glittered with murder. He stopped breathing, moving, anything, staring as the demon growled at him; the chip didn't matter one little bit, not a sliver, because he wasn't inside Spike now, this wasn't erotic or sexy, and Xander suddenly knew the gleaming incisors could tear out his throat in seconds. Any bets on American ingenuity overtaking two centuries of bloodlust, boys and girls? Going once, going twice.

Spike ran past in a blur. Xander moved fast, but not fast enough. The door closed and clicked shut as his fingers closed on the knob.

Fuck!

The sound of the first violent, messy retch reached him and he hit his head against the wood with a bang.

"Spike? Open the door," he said inanely. Spike couldn't open the door; of course, he was busy upchucking his lungs. Heave after heave sounded and Xander twisted the knob in his hand futilely, racking his brain to remember if he had a key. No, this kind of lock didn't have key. Screwdriver? What if Spike passed out in there? Fuck this, he bench-pressed his own weight, he'd kick the fucker down.

He'd just drawn back to do that when the tinny sound of the lock clicking reached him, and he flung the door open, stalking in

How utterly thin the vampire had become slapped him in the face like cold water. Yeah, muscles and triceps, but each rib could be counted, both clavicles pronounced and stark framing the deep hollow below Spike's throat. Jesus Christ how could he not notice that? How far up his dick had his head been, anyhow?

" 'F you're gonna stare get out."

Blush sprouted on his cheeks at the hoarse, tired voice, and he walked over to kneel next to the motionless figure on the floor. Spike's mussed, tousled hair fell around his cheekbones in slept-in waves from where the haunted blue eyes peered out. The brilliant color looked bruised in the harsh light. A husky twelve-year old could take him right now. Xander laid a hand on one bent knee but the vampire pulled away, resting both elbows on his legs and covering his eyes with his palms. He searched desperately for something to say that wouldn't be really wrong, or sound crappy, but he could feel himself crashing off the adrenaline rush and his mind was just not being quick with the supportive words there.

"Fresh out of the bullying are we?" Spike's voice sounded from the depths of his hands, still rough and exhausted. Ugly shame crawled up into Xander's belly and fought it because he knew a guilt trip when he heard one. He'd lived in the hellhole that was his parent's home for nineteen years and he'd learned from the masters.

"I didn't bully you, Spike. I just need to know what's going on."

"What for?" Spike said it so tiredly all he wanted to do was scoop the vampire up and take him to bed, tuck him in, and hold him. If he did they could not do this, this painful awkwardness, but he didn't have that kind of denial in him anymore. It stayed behind in Sunnydale along with his sofa bed, his Uncle Rory's car and the berating, belittling laughter of his father.

Instead Xander reached through Spike's arms to grip a cool chin, lifted it up out of the clutching hands despite Spike's attempts to move away, and looked earnestly at the red-rimmed eyes. "So I can help you," he said quietly.

"Don't need any soddin' help." Spike rubbed the heel of a hand over his temple and Xander had to struggle with the urge to draw the thin, hunched body to him, warm it and hold it. He couldn't let this go right now. He knew all

about letting stuff go, and once you started it got easier to just not deal.

"No?" he asked skeptically. "I think you do unless vamp bulimia is all the rage. The junkie look is out, Spike"

A cool, detached look slipped into the blue eyes, and fuck, he could slap himself for the entire last sentence. "Just say 'no' next time, Harris. I'll respect you in the morning."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it." Calm, focused and calm. "How can you fix this?"

"Nice methadone place over Ventura Boulevard..."

He shook the slender shoulders in frustration, saw the slits of blue widen and his hands rub against bone. "I'm serious. What can you do to get better?"

"Think my HMO's expired."

"Damnit!" Xander gritted through clenched teeth and took several deep breaths while Spike watched him with apprehensive, silent eyes. "You weigh nothing, I can lift you with one hand and you can't keep anything down for longer than a few hours."

" 'Snot true." Spike insisted, and Xander recognized that mulish look, oh yeah. He and that look went way back. That look said 'can't make can't make can't make me.'
"Don't happen all the time."

"Why is it happening at all? Something is wrong...."

"BACK OFF!" Spike snarled in a voice gone guttural, but Xander caught him before he moved away.

"NO." He looked right in the blue eyes trying to bleed gold and lay both hands on Spike's thighs. "No," he repeated, calmer. "I cannot just sit by and watch whatever this is tear you up. You're not here just because you give great head, do you get that?"

"No." The word gave him pause and he raised both eyebrows in question. "I don't 'get that'. Maybe I'm just not like you, Harris." Spike's voice simmered with anger and the use of his last name couldn't have been more telling. "Maybe I don't piss my feelings all over the floor at the drop of a hat. Spend a bit too much time with the womenfolk, did we?"

"Go to hell. That's not gonna work." Xander's hands had fisted on Spike's knees as he tried to reconcile the grouching man on the floor with the one he held not twenty minutes ago. The brilliant blue no longer looked

warm and tender, but as cold and impenetrable as a glacier. Shut down, lights off, closed "You will not play me to change the subject. I need to know."

"Sorry, luv." Spike's voice was soft, gentle, and hard as steel, and his eyes, his eyes had no more depth than a blank wall. "Just 'cause I got a soul don't mean I bare it on command."

Their eyes met, held, and Xander thought he sensed emotion behind the stonewalling, thought he could feel Spike holding on to this cold, detached countenance by the skin of his teeth. "So what are you telling me?" he said carefully. After long seconds of silence from Spike's closed face he answered his own question. "That my only option is watching you puke your guts out in my toilet every night and not do shit about it?"

Spike blinked, and tiny motes of panic seeped through the mulish stare on that beautiful face, he knew he saw them, because it sounded like an ultimatum as it hung in the air between them. It sounded like the next thing was a line to cross or not cross, and he hadn't meant that, hadn't meant to do that.

But he didn't retract it.

Then the sparks of feeling were gone and Spike tilted back his chin, resolve making the blue of his eyes as cold as winter. "Yeah."

"No." Xander shook his head, even as a part of him, the part that recalled vividly how Spike tasted, how it felt to be inside all that muscle and satin, the tenderness in his eyes after they kissed, howled in protest. "I can't do that."

"You said it was enough." Resentment and anger, and there, pain? Making shadowed appearances in the vampire's wooden countenance. He had, Xander realized, just today, uttered those words. Looking at the thin, stoic face, traces of sickness still lingering in the air, he knew he couldn't hold to them.

"I guess I lied." His voice was a whisper because he didn't trust anything stronger. Spike didn't move, his gaze never faltered, but something seemed to slump within him.

Giving two small, resigned nods Spike replied. "I guess you did." And he rose on his feet in one liquid move, and walked away from Xander out of the bathroom.

He didn't know how long he sat there, numb and still, listening to Spike get dressed in the bedroom, pick up the phone and call a cab. He needed fifteen minutes, no

longer, and relayed Xander's address. It felt like shock after shock of frantic denial kept landing hard punches in his stomach but outwardly he could just sit cross-legged on the tile and stare unseeing at the bathtub Spike had been leaning against.

The shower curtain looked grungy. He needed a new one.

Finally the sound of a zipper reached him and he realized Spike had just zipped up his duffel bag and walked downstairs. Forcing himself to stand up he walked slowly to the bedroom, where he tried not to look at the rumpled bed and slipped on some jeans and a t-shirt.

A burning had begun in his throat and he breathed through his nose, ignoring it. Kept moving until he saw Spike, duster on, bag at his feet, looking out the window at the street. Crossing his arms when he really wanted to hug himself, Xander looked mutely at the man who had shared his home and his bed for two days and part of one night.

A thousand comments, reasons, words floated in his brain but he allowed none to find voice. Just stared at the vampire who wouldn't look at him, couldn't believe it could unravel this quickly, tried not to feel as if watching

Spike leave felt like his chest was being ripped out with dull, cruel claws.

Headlights played across the window and two sharp beeps of a horn twisted Xander's heart so he thought he might, at the last minute, tackle Spike to the ground, inhale musk and ash and silk skin and never let go. Almost saw himself do it.

A fine boned pale hand gripped the duffel bag and Spike straightened, looking at him for the first time since the bathroom. He tried to read the brilliant blue eyes to see anything, but they were opaque and hidden. "Thanks for everything." And that voice, god, that voice would until the end of time be his undoing, and his own voice finally escaped his lips.

"Spike." Low, unsteady word.

The sapphire eyes glanced at him from the open door, sharp cheekbones throwing shadows from the porch light, caramel hair like sable, and so much sadness, unspeakable sorrow on those ethereal features. "Bye Xan." The door closed quietly.

Xander embraced himself as he walked on shaking legs to the couch, and stared vacantly in the direction of the TV.

He stared a long time.

Part Seven

Measure twice. Cut once. It was a good rule and Xander followed it. Deafening screech of the saw. Methodical hammering of six-inch nails into new wood still reeking of wood sap, tireless sanding by hand until the surface felt smooth and slightly dusty beneath his palm, and then sanding some more. Muscles groaned, then bitched in protest, his lower back most severely unhappy, but he toiled on; sweating a little, out of breath a little. He wasn't a kid anymore.

Tried not to think about much at all, and definitely not about those two and a half days that seemed to never leave his memory, hovering just below his consciousness to stage sneak attacks with the ruthlessness and success of the Viet Cong. Spent too much time on that already, and it showed. People at work had started to notice, and Xander tried to keep his face expressionless, though it felt like it would crack with Patrick's good-hearted words of concern Patrick only asked after Spike once. Xander's face must have shown something after all.

"No, I'm okay. I haven't been sleeping too well. Sure, dinner would be good. Yeah, I'm fine. Really." He'd had dinner at Pat's house four times since that fateful night;

so hard to face the house alone all of a sudden. Fucking joke since he'd been doing it for ten years.

He couldn't sleep in the bed for very long. Kept imagining he could still smell Spike even after he'd changed the sheets. Changed them that morning at four a.m., jerking the fabric off the bed so hard his knuckles got sheet burn, bundled the whole works into the washer on hot and dumped a quart of detergent in. All the while the mindless mantra in his head *Don't think about it. Don't think about it.* Woke up hard and gasping in the dark, reaching for a cool satin body that wasn't there. Jerked off so often his cock got chafed raw and he stopped, embarrassed with himself. *Don't think about it. Don't think about it. Don't fucking think about it.*

But for now there was only this. Precision. Crafting. Creating with his own two hands. Power tools were for sissies, and the project had taken him four solid evenings, but now stood finished. Xander stepped back and allowed himself some satisfaction. Not too bad for someone out of the construction business for a decade. The sound of two hands clapping interrupted his perusal and he turned to the tall, light-skinned black man, smiling.

"Applause, applause, honey. I am blown away. Ecstatic. Amazed. There are no words."

"It's a pantry, Fontaine."

"What makes you think I was talking about the cupboard?" The sharp black eyes gave him a broadly suggestive look, and Xander laughed a little, for the first time since The Departure. Things were looking up.

"Fontaine, my man." He shook his head. "Where were you in high school when my self-esteem sucked?"

"Dressing like Boy George and asking jocks if they really wanted to hurt me." The statuesque figure, wearing a pristinely pressed coat and tie, draped itself on a cheap plastic chair with a shudder. "The Eighties. May they rest in peace." Xander agreed with a sympathetic hum and began picking up his tools.

He'd begun doing gratis construction work on the Casa Soledad Hospice soon after he got to LA. Figured the dying souls in Boyle Heights needed his talents more than he needed to spend one more Saturday alone in his apartment staring at crappy cartoons. No one made good cartoons anymore. The two-line announcement in the local gay newspaper had been pretty vague, hidden on the back page in a corner. He hauled his toolbox over

anyway; exiting the beat-to-hell Toyota he'd been driving at the time to collide with the appraising stare of a mocha-skinned, bald, unabashedly gay man. The man's hips were canted to the side, elegant hands perched on them like accessories and his t-shirt read 'Shuck Me Suck Me Eat Me Raw~Joe's Crab Shack'. The gaydar never had to work too hard with Fontaine.

"You bring all your SNAP-on tools, BROWN eyes?" The voice spoke with clear, rhythmic precision; a voice used to carrying from a stage in a crowded bar.

"Most of them." He'd grinned and Fontaine looked him over a few more times. He'd dressed to work and was wearing his ripped, paint-splattered jeans and a threadbare t-shirt, both faded and molded to his body from years of washing. His utility belt rode low on his hips and he'd pulled his hair back with a rubber band, gold-rimmed glasses already on. The sharp, long-lashed eyes lifted with a wide smile.

"Honey, if you can't hammer a nail we'll find something for YOU to do."

But Xander could do a lot more than hammer nails.

Fontaine concentrated on getting funding and Xander worked his ass off. Fontaine made sure any first-time

offenders who had a background in construction doing freebie work for a DWI or a first possession charge ended up at the house. Patrick had logged a few Saturdays helping Xander with the ancient electrical wiring, and the odd college student looking to pad their resume wandered through. Once a band of Mormons showed up and Xander thought that accepting a few tracts turned out to be a small price to pay for getting the kitchen painted in record time. Besides, the look on the apple-cheeked boys' faces when the statuesque house facilitator showed up in cut-off shorts, a be-jeweled du-rag and a t-shirt bearing the legend 'More Man Than You'll Ever be And More Woman Than You'll Ever Get' was worth the perky proselytizing. He and Fontaine had been talking and joking ever since, the easiest friendship he'd fallen into since Willow.

Except nothing got past the incisive house coordinator. He had a built-in shit detector the likes of which Xander had never seen. So when Fontaine leaned back on the chair while Xander picked up his tools and said, "Want to tell Auntie Fontaine all about what ails you?" he wasn't really surprised. Not meeting his friend's eyes, Xander began running a large magnet over the floor to pick up any spare nails.

"I'm okay."

"Oh, please." The clear voice dropped low in an aggrieved sigh. "When you show up four days in a row to minister to the bitchy and dying and do a Bob Vila on the kitchen closet something is wrong. Give a girl some credit."

Don't think about it. Don't But that just wasn't going to fly here, in this place he'd refurbished with his bare hands, in front of one of the most honest people he'd ever met. And he was so tired of pretending that he didn't miss Spike so badly it ached.

"Who is he?"

"How do you know it's a 'he'?" Xander asked idly, resigning himself to spilling his guts, but giving avoidance the old college try anyhow.

"Well." A long-fingered hand wandered gracefully to Fontaine's chin. "It is hard to tell with you switch hitters, but call it a hunch. No one can hurt you like your own, Lexi-babe."

Maybe it was the silly nickname that no one else would be allowed to use or the simple, awful truth of the words, but suddenly his throat tightened and his eyes burned and he had to bend down to screw totally

unnecessarily with some wood chips because the deep regret rising in his throat threatened to choke him.

"Tell me his name." Fontaine's voice was low and conversational. "So I can scratch his motherfucking eyes out."

A watery laugh was surprised out of him and he finally looked at his friend, finding nothing but sympathy in the inky black eyes. He was about to utter Spike's name for the first time since That Night when the single syllable was the last thing he said to the vampire, when Fontaine's features became hard and annoyed and the man rose up from the hideous plastic chair with the grace of a debutante. Xander turned around to watch his friend walk toward a short, dark-skinned boy leaning against the door frame, broom hugged forgotten in one arm while he stared at a point below Xander's waist with dreamy, half-closed eyes.

"ExCUSE me." Fontaine stood in the boy's line of sight so the fixed gaze had to travel all the way up to the black man's glaring dark eyes. "You see, honey, the POINT of community service is that you actually BE of service. Do you comprehend? Now quit drooling on my counter and move. The dust bunnies in the rec room are procreating."

"I was yust enjoying da scenery." The boy scoffed in thick East L.A., tossed his curly pert ponytail and tried to look past Fontaine to Xander, who smiled kindly.

"Dream on, sugar. Lexi don't shop the boulevard."

The little hustler sniffed reflectively, adjusting his tight t-shirt. "Heem I do for free."

"Donations accepted only on Tuesdays. Now shoo." Long-fingered hands made waving gestures at the boy.

"I going, I going." But the short boy's glance strained hopefully around the glowering supervisor and Xander shook his head, bemused.

With a sigh, Fontaine returned to where Xander sat, folding himself back on the plastic Wal-Mart special chair with more elegance than that piece of furniture ever deserved.

"New one?"

"Mhm." Fontaine grumbled. "Someone called in a favor. Be out on the street the second he can, mark my words.

"He might make it." He shrugged and Fontaine tilted his head, studying Xander for a moment before replying.

"Maybe. But that's just me being the cynical old drag queen."

"You're not old, Fontaine."

"Yes, I am. How old was the person that cut your heart out in little bitty pieces?" And wasn't that a loaded question?

"Hundred sixty-five." Xander answered and Fontaine nodded thoughtfully. "Does that mean there's hope for me?" Xander smiled. Fontaine could always coax this out of him, no matter how down he might be.

"No. He's a little younger. I knew him from back home."

"Ah. Blast from the past."

Xander felt his smile become bitter. "You have no idea."

"Baby, do you think you're the only one this has happened to? That's probably why it did happen. You meet someone you knew once and, suddenly, you don't have to do the whole my history, your history song-and-dance. Next thing you know, there you are with cucumber in one hand and a glow in the dark condom in the other." Xander glanced at him pointedly.

"Or maybe that's just me. Were you safe?" Fontaine asked bluntly and Xander rolled his eyes.

"Yes, mom."

"You better. Don't make me go upside your head."

"Nope, I like my head downside if that's okay with you."

"Damn skippy."

"You know," Xander said as he arranged his tools in the metal box, "I've always wondered what that meant. Is it someone named Skippy? Is skippy some kind of cool shorthand for 'you bet your ass?' I am not getting out of this, am I?"

"Nope." Fontaine said. "You can do the white-boy verbal two step all you want, Lexi. I know you ain't right." A gentle finger lifted Xander's chin and he reluctantly met his friend's concerned dark eyes, so black he could see himself in them. Little Xanders stared back at him. "That pretty brown stare is so sad, baby."

Fontaine doubled, then tripled and Xander looked away, blinking furiously at the burning beneath his lids. A strong, long arm guided him onto a plastic monstrosity and he let it, throat working, fingers wiping quickly at the

moisture that escaped his lashes, struggling not to cut and bawl in his friend's arms.

"Goddamn." He laughed roughly at himself, as he bent over to rest his elbows on his knees. "Where did you learn to do that? You are scary, man."

"Boy Scouts." Fontaine's slender hand rubbed his back in slow, soothing circles, like Xander had rubbed Spike's that time he threw up and Xander gave a deep sigh, allowing himself to be soothed, and began speaking.

He started with the night flight he blew off when he found Spike in the airport bar and ended the night Spike left. He left out that Spike was a vampire. As much as he'd never seen Fontaine thrown yet, he thought spouting casual phrases about the undead, demons, and one hundred sixty five year old vampires with souls might do it. When he finished Fontaine had leaned closer, chin in hand, sharp eyes unblinking.

"Two and a half days, hm?"

"Give or take."

"Must have been some good sex."

"Phenomenal," Xander deadpanned, letting the images come, not even bracing for them anymore. Soft, soft,

satin muscle, bouncy curls like sewing silks and sweet Jesus the tightness of him; the mind-blowing feel of being inside all that velvet and strength and even after two weeks, he couldn't imagine being in anyone else, with anyone else; the bare, naked look in those eyes.

Fontaine's eyebrow did the question mark thing Spike's could do and Xander shut his eyes against another onslaught of girly tears. He'd had enough of that today, thanks.

Two days and change, it shouldn't do this to him, dammit, it shouldn't!

"So, let me get this straight, for lack of a better word." Fontaine began, pulling him out of that place he'd been. Pulling him out kicking and screaming, even though outwardly Xander just blinked mildly, ran a hand through his hair. "You don't see him for fifteen years. You run into each other at the airport, he looks all delicious and needy, you bring him home, bodily fluids are exchanged, and you go off because he won't tell you all his secrets?"

"It's not that simple. Something was wrong." Except put like that, it sounded pushy as hell, didn't it?

"Do you think he's using?"

"No." Xander admitted. Whatever had Spike doing a Karen Carpenter in his commode, it wasn't drugs. Not after hour after hour of being together. "No," he repeated decisively.

"So, no drugs. But he wouldn't tell you after the a grand total of two days, what was going on."

"No."

"Lexi." Xander turned his eyes to Fontaine's and was actually surprised to see exasperation coloring them.

"What are you, a lesbian? You yourself aren't all down with the opening up, or isn't that what that last little boy said, and the one before him? We're MENS, baby. What side of the fence we take our pleasure with don't matter, we're still MENS, and we don't give it up on a dime. Not unless we ain't got no sense, or a daddy complex."

Xander looked away, because of course some of that had been lurking around his head ever since that night. That he could have handled things better. Been calmer. Not painted Spike into a corner with no out but to leave. *but the sickness, couldn't take that, couldn't watch that* No, he couldn't have. But sitting here Spikeless for fourteen days and counting, all he had were second guesses and might-have-beens. All he'd ever have. *NO*

A warm hand smoothed his back again and he turned to Fontaine, saw a reflection of how bleak he looked in his friend's eyes. "I'm not sure I'll ever see him again."

"Did you get the impression he felt the same way?"

"I thought he did," Xander said softly.

"Then you'll see him again," Fontaine said, smiling warmly. A smile not many people saw, Xander knew. One that Fontaine didn't trot out often, because when a gay black man chose to make a life's work out of working with end-stage AIDS patients, and said black man had been a fairly well-known drag queen called Luscious Dupree, and said black man didn't have the decorum or inclination to be even vaguely embarrassed about that fact, warmth didn't get you very far. But when the smile appeared it was a gift, and Xander returned it as best he could.

"I don't think so."

"You need to have some faith, my brother."

"I'll work on it," he sighed, and felt as if he could just lay down here on the floor and go to sleep. Fontaine's hand lay on the middle of his back again, and he was so grateful for it the tears almost started again. Man, he was messed UP. "Thanks so much for the pantry, Lexi.

Now go home with your bad self and get some sleep. You look tired."

"I thought I always looked gorgeous," he teased. Marching on. Okay, limping on. He'd take what he could get.

"You do, baby. It's the eyes."

Xander nodded in understanding and then leaned and hugged his friend, floating in the cloud of patchouli and clothes starch that always reminded him of Fontaine. Left with promises to call soon, to not get too depressed, to call if he needed ANYTHING, did he hear? Mind already on the empty vastness of the town house and how he'd made a bed he couldn't lie in.

NIGHT

The doorbell intruded on him, an insistent, buzzing insect and Xander stirred in the easy chair, trying to turn away from the sound. Must have fallen asleep in front of the TV again, and the muscles in his back groaned with every movement, paying him back in spades for his carpentry marathon. Everything felt fuzzy, but grating, dancing on his nerves with sharp needles: the canned laughter from Leno, the bright light he'd forgotten to even dim, the pilly

fleece of his rattiest sweatpants rough on his cock, because laundry seemed to take too much energy and he couldn't even look at his black sweats without his chest getting tight.

Chime, chime, fucking chime, like the person got their finger stuck on the button and he stumbled to his bare feet, running a shaking hand over his face. Fucking ten forty-five at night and didn't people have a LIFE? Who the hell would show up now? Most of his friends had kids, and jobs, and Fontaine had way too much class to just appear unannounced.

Actually bumped his head on the door when he leaned into the peephole to look and had a kind of scary moment when the bubble of laughter rising in his chest fought to escape, because he thought the sound might not be good. Thought the sound might become the slightest bit *insane* hysterical, and he thanked any god that would listen that he lived alone and no one was around to watch him fall apart piece by tiny piece. Finally focused one bleary eye and saw the space full of the top of someone's head before the person looked up.

Summer blue gaze gone indigo in the porch light filled his vision and Xander pulled his head back as if the sight burned his corneas. Every ounce of air gone from his

lungs, just vacuumed out, and he stood with one hand on the door, trying to grasp shallow breaths around the shock, not moving, unable to move at all. For long moments he stood there, still, until the doorbell began its merry melody again, and a strangely disembodied hand closed on the doorknob and flung it open.

Spike stood under the light, hand on the same black duffel, the other holding a cigarette that unraveled a long ribbon of smoke into the night. Honey-blond curls catching highlights, fine bones a study in shadows, and since when did Spike wear BLUE? Xander didn't think he'd ever seen the vampire in anything but red and black, and the rich royal tone of the tight knit top turned Spike's eyes to sapphires. Those eyes on Xander, a million emotions in them, no shutters anymore, and a powerful rush of almost dizzying anger suffused him. Because he'd been dreaming this, he'd just left this scenario in his head. The evidence sat between his legs like a stone- not hard, no, but wanting. Throbbing. Needing with an ache so deep it defied description and now he was HERE...

"Lose the cigarette." Xander commanded harshly, and Spike held his eyes for a beat before obediently bending to rub the tobacco out in the soil of a potted ficus plant. Xander stepped back and Spike hesitated on the threshold, like he wasn't sure that walking in would be a

good idea, but finally ducked his head, curls cascading forward, and entered. He shut the door behind him and leaned back, lifted sooty lashes to lock stares.

Xander felt held together by cheap rivets about to burst free, and he was so fucking angry, he was fucking livid. Angry because he'd been dreaming and wanting Spike the moment the door closed behind him that night. Enraged that just looking at Spike could make him weak and desperate, infuriated that Spike just stood there, asking, oh, everything with that look in his eyes, that bare naked look. Jesus, he had to clench his fists to keep from flinging himself at the man and just babbling, laying himself bare at Spike's feet if he'd just promise to never leave again and Xander refused to DO that, goddamnit! He wasn't that person anymore; hadn't been puppy Xander or doormat Xander for years; 'Walk on me, hurt me, insult me, but don't leave me! Should I lay a little flatter, if you please?' He'd worked long and hard not to be that person, and FUCK Spike for making him feel that way again.

The delicate Adam's apple swallowed, one unneeded breath. "Xander, I.."

"Shut up," he ground out, seeing the brilliant blue bruise at the words. Savage joy blossomed in his chest from it.

"Shut. Up." Repeated before turning away and walking- he hoped calmly- back in the house, leaving Spike standing inside the doorway holding his duffel bag. Breathed through the pounding in his throat, trying not to fucking swoon from the Spike-scent in the air that aimed right for his brain like pure heroin: musk, ash, clinging remnants of the night air.

Reaching the recliner just as his legs gave out beneath him, Xander realized he'd sat on the remote and cursed, while reaching under his ass for the thing. When he finally rescued it from easy chair hell and leaned back, Spike stood directly in front of him, blocking his view of the TV. Xander's eyes followed the slender, lean, lines of that body all the way up to the devastating intensity of summer blue eyes.

"You're in my way." The words were hoarse, tight, and Xander scrambled to sit up when Spike dropped to his knees in a rolling, feline move. Blinked at the bald regret in the flawless blue orbs because looking right at them burned, like the sun.

"What d'you want me to do?" Spike asked plaintively. Xander breathed hard through his nose, unable to tear his eyes from the expressive face that looked like it might

crumple before him, realizing how close Spike was at that height to... "I left because..."

"No." Xander shook his head, hands gripping the arms of the recliner so hard he felt the leather squeak. "No, you don't get to do this. You don't get..." Spike reached out a leather-clad arm, hesitant, and Xander shot a hand out to stop the movement before he could think. They both gasped at the touch. Locked eyes that wouldn't let go, and he wanted the anger. He wanted to nurture it and feed it, it felt better than anguished despair, but, ah, he was drowning in Spike's eyes, going under, and the anger just barely kept him afloat.

Spike's hand closed around his where it lay on the vampire's breastbone, smooth-rough fingers slightly trembling, and Xander lids dropped at the touch. Should have known, should have known one touch and his mind would shatter, explode and disintegrate into a thousand pieces because, oh, because the very flesh on his palms hungered for Spike's skin like sustenance. He begrudged every fiber of the fabric beneath his hand, and even as part of him fought to hold onto the clean, sharp rage, the need to feel, continue feeling, split him in two. His other hand inched over Spike's chest on crawling fingers. No heartbeat beneath, but the firm pecs rose up and down

like Xander's own. Closer, closer, no control, not a shred, damnit, DAMNIT.

He pulled Spike to him with an angry growl and hadn't realized he'd yanked Spike's head back by his hair until the strong chin snapped up. Xander stared into ocean-blue eyes that didn't even look surprised at the move, and that brought the fury back in a storm.

He could do anything to Spike right now, ANYTHING. He could sense it. The knowledge horrified him, and made him hard, and horrified him again. He didn't want a professional victim, he'd never wanted that, and Spike would rather offer himself up like some fucking sacrifice than let Xander IN a little bit *like you* and Xander's breath trickled out in a shocked stutter. The hunger in Spike's eyes became questioning concern as Xander shook his head, staring into the brilliant blue with fear.

"It's like a part of you is always away, Alex. Like you don't think enough of us to trust me with anything important. Do you realize that?"

"Alex, I just can't be with anyone that holds back like that. Great sex isn't enough, and I can't believe I just said that. I should thank you, really. Until you I wasn't sure I deserved more."

"No," he whispered.

"Xander?" Spike touched his cheek gently, head still jerked back in the same awkward position when Xander crushed Spike to him with a moan, groping for skin beneath the leather with something like insanity. No finesse, nothing thoughtful as his hands dove under the shirt, slipped in the *too loose* waist of the jeans to cup muscular globes of flesh and Spike groaned into his neck, suddenly alive and WILD in his arms.

And YES cool fingers on his back under the awful t-shirt and cool lips mouthing his neck in a way that dove right to his groin. Leaning over like this made his back bitch some more but that could go right to hell at this moment because, oh, scrape of teeth on his pulse, oh. With a helpless sound Xander tightened his arms around Spike's waist and pulled him up on the recliner, up and back, felt the expensive La-Z-boy shift down, felt Spike start in alarm that melted away when Xander gripped his face to pull him into a bruising kiss.

God he'd missed this, he'd craved this so much. The litany whirled in Xander's head as he devoured Spike's mouth in biting, claiming breaths. Smoke and salt and so, so sweet, the cool mouth dissolved into his with a groan. Spike opened his legs around Xander's hips, knees locked

behind his back. He thrust into the pulsing hardness battling with his, rubbing the rough fleece on his sensitive cock in delicious friction, over and over until Xander blindly rolled on top of the slimmer body, straddling it on the dangerously creaking chair. Cradling Spike's head in his hands, he rocked hard into the slim hips, the sight of the pure desire on Spike's face causing pre-come to constantly leak between them, and, fuck, so good, so, oh.

Spike morphed in his hands; he felt the ridged brow lower, saw feral amber when the sooty lashes opened, and they stilled, suspended for long moments as brown gaze met gold, the sound of their hard breathing riding over the pulsing in Xander's ears and the one between his legs. Giving Spike's temples a faint caress with his thumbs, Xander brushed his lips over Spike's mouth with a helpless sound, again, gently tracing the long fangs with his tongue and Spike spasmed beneath him, cool hands scratching at his back. The pain sizzled along his skin, ropes of desire to his crotch and he clutched Spike to him, tasting the hollow of his neck as the vampire quivered underneath him, wanting to drown in Spike's scent, his flavor, to roll in him like a field of opium flowers. Spike's hand suddenly burrowed its way between them, palmed his erection and squeezed

skillfully. Xander came so fast he wailed as orgasm ripped through him, wave after wave and he clamped down on Spike's neck as he shuddered, breaking skin with his teeth, blood rising into his mouth. Spike HOWLED in his ear, body shaking apart beneath him as they rode out the waves, the recliner shaking precariously as they writhed against each other, grabbing and thrusting, and never letting go.

Part Eight

He came to with a yawn, and grunted at the twinge in his back. He also realized he was alone on the recliner, his stomach in a pretzel-esque contortion that had his lumbar region snarking in truly eloquent fashion. Rolling stiffly onto his back he gave a sigh of pain, then paused, looking around the room.

No duffel on the floor or near the door, and his heart began to sink like a stone. No. No WAY, no fucking WAY Spike would come back just for *no*? *You attacked him and didn't let him talk* "Shut up," he muttered. That little

voice in the back of his head was really getting on his nerves. Reaching over, he flipped the handle on the right-hand side of the chair and the back flipped up cheerfully, causing him to wince at the spark of pain in his back. "No." He repeated to himself as he gingerly found his footing in a stiff waisted move that made him sympathize with pregnant women.

Hello. This is Xander's denial. I serve no purpose other than to metaphorically fuck and torment you. He couldn't have left. *oh, really?* Xander took to the stairs, trying to ignore the awful, growing suspicion that he had royally screwed up, and shit, he couldn't get that back, he could never get that back.

The sound of the shower reached him as he neared the top the of the stairs and the relief was so great he had to stop and brace himself on the wall, hand at his stomach to still the flutters there.

The black duffel sat on the floor, unzipped, and Xander took everything in: open travel gear; mussed bed, still unmade from the night before last when he tried to sleep in it and failed- again. The bathroom currently occupied by the person he'd most wanted to see again. Really here. Holy god, he was really HERE, and again with the flutters. Also with the disbelief, so Xander wondered how

good of an idea it was to join Spike in there, more just to see him again, to reaffirm that he hadn't imagined the hot recliner sex, and would he ever be able to sit there again without getting turned on?

Instead, he carefully bent over to rummage through the surprisingly neat and folded contents of the travel bag. Black jeans, black shirt, black briefs - which made his ears warm - but no sweat pants. Of course. Like Spike would ever own such a plebian article of clothing. Xander did find, on the very bottom, a plain white t-shirt, which he removed and lay on the bed, smoothing it out over the rumpled bedcovers. Rising slowly, and keeping one ear on the shower, he walked to the corner of the room and bent over carefully to pick up the pair of black sweat pants that had been lying in the same place ever since Spike left. Xander hadn't moved them, couldn't even look at them, as if to acknowledge their presence would turn him to stone. Knowing that if he got too close, the urge to bury his nose in the soft, worn fabric and inhale for one slight scent of Spike would be too strong, and he'd have gone crazy. Crazier.

Xander spread the sweats out next to the white t-shirt, absently stroking the soft, worn, material; unable to see them without remembering Spike in them, how they dipped below his navel. How the curve of hipbone

looked, vulnerable and sharp, above the dark elastic waistband.

Another twinge of pain at his own waist made him suck in his breath, and fine! Mea culpa, mea-fucking culpa for drowning his sorrows in carpentry. He needed an ibuprofen cocktail with a dash of hot shower, maybe, except the pills were in the bathroom. Remembering the spare bottle in his work backpack, Xander left the clothes on the bed and negotiated the stairs again, grumbling further when he realized he'd left his backpack in the damn car due to his earlier fatigued, depressed state earlier.

After a trek out to the garage and back, Xander popped three ibuprofen with a swallow of water and walked up the stairs again. The shower had stopped but the door closed, a sliver of light still shone from beneath, and he firmly quashed the urge to knock.

What if he's sick in there? You could knock... Jesus, let the straw go.

The plus of an entire house was the having of more than one bathroom. He could do the mature thing and give Spike some space after the hot and sweaty reunion. *Maybe he doesn't want to talk to you.* Maybe he had to kick his inner voice's ass. Resolving not to pay attention

to his internal peanut gallery anymore Xander gathered some clean clothes and walked across the hall for a quick shower in the guest room.

The shower took longer than planned once he got a good look at himself in the mirror, though. Shit, Spike couldn't resist THAT? His hair looked like birds nested in it, he had a five o'clock shadow, and not in a sexy, GQ way, and the goatee was scraggly. Spike's skin was sensitive enough as it was. So he'd washed AND conditioned his hair, trimmed his beard, and ditched the ancient U2 t-shirt for a maroon thermal top before padding into the bedroom. He paused, stilled by the sight of the undisturbed clothes still on the bed.

The duffel bag was gone.

His heart dropped. He felt it, a long descent to his toes like the first hill on a roller coaster.

Christ, chill the fuck OUT, Harris! So it's gone. So what? Neat vampire. You saw all the folded clothes. Must have been a free gift with purchase deal when he got the soul: politeness and neatness YOURS for the low, low price of only a pound of flesh!

The desire for the Spike he knew in his basement overtook him, total and complete. Towels on the floor

Spike; smoke in his face Spike; steal his radio, dog his clothes, rude, crude, dangerous to know blood-sucking Spike. Xander knew that one. Always knew where he stood, where they stood, back then. That Spike didn't have the power to shred his heart to pieces, to make his breath catch as he sped downstairs. He smelled the smoke the minute he entered the kitchen and for the second time that night relief flooded powerfully through him. He could see Spike pacing on the back patio, which was really nothing more than a glorified slab of concrete with a trellis and some plants. Even before Xander stepped outside he saw Spike had on a black t-shirt tucked into black jeans, his duster swirling around his legs. The ends of the honey curls gleamed damply, and the vampire cut a look at him as Xander opened the door and walked outside.

"Didn't want to stuff up the house." Spike gestured the cigarette at him with a flick of a wrist and Xander nodded, eyes following the pacing vampire where Spike outlined the perimeter of the small patio with restless, impatient strides. It was the first sign of the agitated pre-soul demon Xander had been reminiscing about, and he had a moment when he wondered if that demon was back and no longer wanted a thirty-something human with a bad back.

"Sit down?" he offered, but Spike shook his head on an exhale before removing another cigarette from his pocket and lighting it with the one in his hand. For long seconds they stared at each other then Xander's gaze fell to the purpling mark on Spike's neck peeking out of the duster's collar. Xander realized that he had done that, recalled the gush of salt sweet nectar exploding on his tongue. A huge weight of awkwardness settled between them and Xander tried to overcome it by reaching out to see how badly he'd mauled the petal-soft skin. Spike caught his wrist with lightening-quick accuracy and he froze, stung beyond belief at the gesture.

"Sorry. Sorry, I..." *Fucked THIS up, didn't you Harris*, he thought in despair. Well, of course. Guy comes back and you not only don't let him say a damn thing you fucking attack him in the bargain. Smooth. What's that say about what you think of him. "Sorry," he repeated intelligently, went to move away but the nimble, cool fingers tightened into a vise, blue eyes all of a sudden boring into his with burning emotion.

"It's not that," the vampire blurted. Xander knit his brows even as his insides jittered at the touch of Spike's hand on his skin.

"What's not....what?"

"Right now, I didn't mean...when I pulled away, it's just..." Xander realized the hand on his wrist was shaking, fine tremors, like ague, and he turned to study Spike even closer. The agitated pacing, the chain smoking, the imperceptible little pants making the vampire's chest rise and fall all said Spike was scared, terrified of something.

"I..." Pink tongue peeked out to lap at pink lips. "Just don't touch me while I say it, right? Won't get through it."

"Spike..."

"Drusilla did it," Spike began bluntly, and the words didn't penetrate until Xander played them back a couple of times; what they were and what they referred to. He reached for Spike's face without thinking, head shaking, but the blond man backed away, blue eyes pained, angry, and apprehensive.

"No. Not like this." Xander whispered.

"Yeah, like this."

He stared into the tortured eyes until the silence stretched out in the space between them. He tried once more. "You don't have to.."

"She found me in Africa." Spike cut him off before beginning the compulsive pacing again, like a trapped lion. Xander didn't open his mouth again. He knew the start of a story when he heard one, and the fearful glint in Spike's eyes told him the blond man needed to get through this in one swoop, if he could.

"I'd been wandering around, out of me mind, basically. Soddin' miracle I didn't crisp myself in the sunlight a dozen times over. Never understood what Angel went through 'till then, the...pain of what you've done; it never leaves. How the." Deep swallow, and Xander watched trembling fingers bring a cigarette up to the parted lips before the vampire lashed out at a tall ceramic planter, shattering it, shards, Boston Fern and soil scattering everywhere, causing Xander to jump. "Lives of everyone you ever drained flying around you like birds, every one, and there were so many birds. So." Angry inhale, quick exhale. "So bloody many."

Spike's eyes had fixated on the tips of his Docs; he seemed to be speaking to them. "Said I called to her when the soul happened, that she heard me. When she showed up I was so happy I wept. Can you imagine? She did save me, though," he added, as if Xander had said something against Spike's sire. "Had three K'Nethlin demons at her bidding and she bundled me up and took

me away, singing to me the whole time. Wasn't until I listened to what the words were that I got petrified. She thought she could-fix-me." An actual *giggle* escaped Spike's lips as he walked and it ran a cold finger down Xander's spine, because try as he might he couldn't find any sanity in it. "Like I was a defective motorcar, or a broken pipe. She knew I had the chip, she knew, but she didn't understand."

"When I was out of it she'd feed me blood from her own mouth and her own veins, cutting her wrist and holding it to me lips like I was an infant. Except when I woke up, when..." Spike's eyes fluttered closed and he covered his face, cigarette dancing in his quivering hands. For a second Xander would have bet his life Spike couldn't continue, not with the trembling and the hyperventilating, but the cut-glass features soon peeked out again from under the tousled curls, and Spike continued. "I knew the blood was human. She wouldn't feed me anythin' else, and I could... Xan, I could *taste* the people. I could feel their essence on my tongue, like a wine bouquet. I knew their hopes and dreams and how many kids they had and when they first shagged. I knew what made them angry and their last thoughts, I knew.."

DON'T WANT TO KNOW THIS! Xander's brain trumpeted shrilly and he shut. It. Up. He'd asked for it, no? Oh yes,

he had, and he would sit here through every word because it was the least he could fucking do.

"I kept bein' sick on the blood, even hers, because hers tasted like poisoned sugar. I could see how it was with her, the voices, the illusion, and it made me crazy. I went crazy for a while." Spike said this like someone would say "I went to the store for a while."

"She got so angry then, more desperate to 'fix' me, and she started bringin' home victims that weren't altogether drained for me to finish off. I wouldn't do it, didn't want to, but then she stopped feeding me from herself and I got...I got so hungry." Tears thickened the velvet voice, ran from beneath the tightly squeezed lashes, and Xander watched the gossamer pearls run across Spike's face and drip on his shirtsleeves before an alabaster hand dashed at them like they were acid and Spike started to pace again, as if he could outrun the awful memory. "So awfully hungry. So I did a few, just a few!" Spike's voice became almost childlike in its defense. "Didn't matter. Almost nothin' stayed down, and the chip went off with the ones that weren't drained. Gave me nosebleeds."

Oh my Jesus God, Xander thought numbly. He was tortured. The crazy bitch *tortured* him and he thought he deserved it.

"Then she came in one morning chipper as posies, said she figured it out, but she wouldn't tell me what. Just kept prattlin' on about everything being all right after 'this' and so forth. I was pretty weak, so I just went back to sleep." Xander watched Spike like he would a tennis match: back and forth, inhale, exhale into a cloud of smoke. "Came to on me stomach with my arms and legs latched down. Would have thought Dru got tired of not gettin' her end off but I knew she shagged those demons blind, and she hadn't touched me that way since she found me. I heard her near my ear, said she was going to take the chip out and everything would be grand after that. I tried to tell her I'd tried that, that it wasn't that simple, but I forgot my Dru's no complicated girl. The hack she got to cut into me couldn't get it out, and he tried for hours. Wound kept healing so he used holy water to keep it open..."

"Oh, God." Xander whispered when he hadn't intended to say anything at all, felt moisture on his chin and swiped at it. Only then did he realize he'd been crying. A steady flow of tears trickled down his face. They felt cold.

"It's almost over." Spike said, not unkindly, and Xander had to struggle not to make a sound at that. It was so damned obscene, Spike comforting HIM.

"That's why the scar. Can heal from holy water, but not that much, not continually. Hurt." Spike paused. Xander noted the tightening of his knuckles into fists, the closed eyes. "Hurt quite a lot. For a long time. Couldn't really move for a while, and Dru lost interest after that. It's as if that was her grand idea and when it didn't work all the wind went out of her sails. Came home with some boy band reject soon after and got her demons all in a snit. Barely noticed when I left." The last sentence occurred abruptly, so much so that Xander hadn't realized the narrative was over until Spike stopped pacing and looked at him, unspeakable sorrow in the summer blue. "I'm all empty now," he said in wonder. "Feels odd."

Xander walked towards Spike, struggling not to sob, wiping his eyes on his sleeve but never dropping the vampire's angry, apprehensive gaze. However, when he reached out and Spike tripped backing up he almost lost it. "Come on." The sobs cracked his voice. "Just let....I'm so sorry..."

"Yeah, that's it." Spike spat out, voice brittle with tears as well but so much resentment in the shining blue orbs.

"Know now and it's all 'poor Spike', 'I'm sorry, Spike.'" He tried to light another cigarette and the flame danced and jiggled from the shaking so much that Xander reached to help, but got a sharp slap at his hands for the gesture. "Fuck you, Xander!" Xander pulled back at a total loss, panic so profound it had no name.

"Got your precious story and now what? Takin'me in like I'm charity? Still the White Knight after all these years, ey? 'Poor cracked in the center Spike," A thin finger flew to the fine temple and pointed savagely, and Xander couldn't stop staring at him in abject horror. "Can't let 'im die and end his misery. Can't let 'im starve.' Bleedin' wonder this place ain't overrun with strays for you to save, but you were waitin' for the big time, were..."

"Are you done?" The furious question flew out of Xander's mouth without planning, and the anger that had turned into lust was back, clean and vicious. He let it take him, despite how much his soul broke for the pain Spike had undergone. "Because not even Mike Tyson referred to himself in the third person that much."

A shocked look overcame the fury on the perfect features before the angry mask fell. "I'm not bloody done"

"The fuck you aren't. That's all the pity parade I can stand for one night. My turn."

"Go to hell." The snarl ripped out of a mouth suddenly full of fangs but Xander reached for him anyway, overcoming the desperate attempts to get away, until he had both arms in his hands and pulled the vampire kissing close.

"Listen, damnit, you LISTEN," he shook Spike furiously and amber eyes with pupils like pinpoints stared back at him. "That's what you think? That I'd take you in out of pity?"

"Why else?" Spike growled back and Xander thrust him away in disgust and frustration.

"What the hell do you think that was, earlier?"

The pink mouth curled in disdain. "A pity fuck."

Xander's hand shot out, slapping hard and Spike's head jerked sideways from the force, curls flying.

The sound seemed to echo in the quiet night. When the vampire turned back slowly tears had escaped their moorings and sailed glistening streaks down the ocean of his face. Four red fingerprints stood out like exclamation points, marring the fair skin, bracketing the livid purple

bruise on his neck, and Xander's stomach roiled at the sight of them. *Great, Harris. So maybe dear old dad isn't as dearly departed as we thought.* Before guilt had a chance to paralyze him, Xander grasped the sinewy arms once more and pulled Spike close, blinking tears out of his eyes yet again. Spike didn't resist this time.

"It wasn't just fucking to me," he said, voice uneven and rough. Spike met his stare silently, a million emotions flashing among the anger. "I thought I'd never see you again and it killed me. I missed you in my bed and in my life and I hate what happened to you. I hate it," Xander repeated vehemently. "I'm not sorry you told me, I can't be, and it's not pity. I had no right to hit..." His voice broke on the last word and his throat worked for control as the magnitude of what he did grew. Oh, god, what had he done?

The starry, dark lashes slipped shut and more tears escaped their confines to trickle down each sharp cheekbone. Spike's forehead dropped onto Xander's shoulder, the body in his hands suddenly malleable. He slid his arms around the thin back even as Spike tried to hold him away with both hands. "Y' don't know what you're doin', Xander." The black velvet voice could scarcely be heard.

"Maybe," Xander murmured into the honey curls, inhaling peach shampoo and smoke. "You owe me a planter."

Spike snuffled into his neck and he thought it was crying until the watery laughter became louder. Xander crushed the slim body tight with shaking arms, because he had almost lost this unbelievable, amazing man. Xander felt like he'd walked in the dark and missed the open manhole by inches and the dark abyss called his name still.

Trembling lips covered his and Xander crushed Spike to him, greedy and starving, the contact through clothes not enough. Never enough. Relief and wonder, desire, overwhelmed him as their tongues fenced, as he re-learned the taste of Spike and swam in it. Spike had to pry them apart for him to breathe through the dizziness in his head. They stayed welded to each other and he wanted to lick the tears off that perfect face.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, fitting his hand over the just-fading imprints on Spike's cheek. "Spike, I'm"

"Shhh, luv." Spike whispered into his mouth, eyes dark blue and shining. "I know." Their hands delved into waistbands and under t-shirts, seeking, claiming. They fell into another kiss and Xander moaned far back in his

throat because he had thirsted for this like water, craved it like oxygen and his memories had nothing on the reality of it. The palm of his hand slid between Spike's legs, cupping the hardness there and the vampire gasped into his mouth. He rubbed the denim with the heel of his hand, fingers following the seam, pushing up until Spike made that keening sound that found his spine and ignited all his nerves. "Xander....," A pleading whisper.

The moving of his legs took actual concentration but Xander began to walk backwards, pulling Spike by the hands, wanting him in the bed, their bed, open and naked. Despite his best efforts, they bogged down on the stairs or when one or the other of them started a kiss or a touch that always escalated immediately. Spike's duster was lost along the way, as was Xander's thermal shirt. By the time they reached the bedroom, Xander had no patience left, and he pushed Spike down, pulling his white t-shirt off in the same quick move.

Spike sprawled topless, on the rumpled bed, curls askew, pink lips moist and parted, blue eyes hungry. Xander knelt over him and stared. The feverish want of seconds before calmed, evened as he stared at the beautiful vampire before him. *He's here. He's mine. God help me, I think he is* Spike's expression started to become doubtful, but Xander placed both hands on the jean-clad

knees, stilling him. "Do you know how amazing you are?" he asked in a whisper, because that was all his emotions would allow.

Spike swallowed, shaking his head. "No." Low, plain voice, wrapped in melting butterscotch.

"I do," said Xander.

Spike's hands moved towards the buttons on his jeans but Xander caught them gently and eased them over Spike's head, laying over him but not touching, the ache in his back a forgotten, far-away throb. He fit Spike's fingers around the bottom of the wooden headboard, mouth playing around the vampire's lips. Spike's legs parted around his waist and the fire in Xander's veins roared despite how he kept it slow, easy. He brushed their crotches together, the slightest pressure, and Spike threw his head back into the pillow, shuddering.

"I said I wanted to taste you." His lips said against a soft ear and Spike began doing that airless pant he did, sparks of gold starting to lace the pure blue. The vampire's gaze never left him and the corded, muscled arms quivered with tension but didn't move from where Xander had placed them. It was this wordless acquiescence that had Xander's cock straining against the zipper of his jeans, pulsing and leaking. His fingers ran lightly over Spike's

arms, baptizing every muscle with his touch, tracing the sharp clavicles, circling the stiff, dusky-rose nipples until Spike made a ragged sound.

Roaring, ringing in his head, but outwardly calm, *like the eye of a hurricane*, he thought. They'd had rough, intense, savage sex, frenzied lovemaking, but not this, and Xander wanted to give Spike this. To show him it didn't always need to be rough to be good.

With intense, specific care Xander undid each button of Spike's 501's, sliding his thumb over each inch of skin revealed. Then he smiled at the writhing, trembling figure on the bed and shifted back to undo Spike's boots and lay them neatly to the side.

"Xander, please," Spike gritted, watching in desperation as Xander removed the socks and rolled them into a ball to toss away.

"Hm?" Xander murmured absently as he stood and took hold of Spike's jeans pulling them off in one smooth slide. His vampire lay nude in the bedside lamp-light, beautiful - Mercury or Adonis wrapped in alabaster. That bone, his favorite obsession, sharp on Spike's hips; he had to touch it. He knelt between Spike's legs once more. The avid blue eyes watched him as he surrounded the weeping cock with both hands, pushing the foreskin all the way

down, and twirling the pre-come around the head, gossamer, sparkling strands. Meeting Spike's eyes, Xander brought a finger to his mouth and sucked, sweet salt musk on his tongue, and Spike groaned, hips arching helplessly. "Please, please..."

"Okay," Xander whispered. He wondered, in some compartment of his brain not struck dumb by the feast before him, if Spike-sex had mysterious healing qualities, because his backache was all but gone. He kissed the quivering head of Spike's cock almost primly, liquid making his lips glossy, before taking all of Spike's cool, trembling length in his mouth.

"Ah!" Spike cried out, spasming almost in two from the attack, hands no longer above but buried in Xander's hair, a desperate carding that Xander didn't mind. In fact, he barely registered the pull on his scalp because Spike was in his *mouth* and Xander was making the sleek, white body quiver and groan, and slim hips thrust higher and nothing, nothing could compare with this incredible power. Sliding his hands beneath, Xander cupped Spike's hips and lifted them, beginning a gentle motion that slid the pulsing cock in and out of his lips, and the vampire's back arched further, hands pulling sheets from the mattress, rending comforters and pillows.

"Almost, Xander, ..." Spike panted, thighs quivering and Xander shushed him from around his cock, reached a hand down in his jeans where 'wet spot' didn't even begin to describe how soaked he was. He pulled away, smiling at the whimper of protest.

"I'm going inside you with my finger," Xander said, low and clear, lips moving against Spike's steadily leaking member. "And you're going to come in my mouth when I do."

The vampire's snarling groan rose high as Xander's mouth took Spike's cock and his finger breached muscle and tissue at once, lips sucking hard, finger brushing that magic spot and his thumb rubbing the sensitive place behind Spike's scrotum and his ass. An animal growl and Spike exploded down his throat, body quaking, little tremors fluttering against his secreted finger. All it took was a sharp squeeze from his own hand for Xander to come with a breathless "Uh!" body shaking then melting into one pile of raw nerve endings, the cock between his lips still twitching.

Crawling slowly up the bed after his mind came down from the clouds, Xander shed his jeans so he could pull Spike's cool body against his hotter one. The heavenly satin clutched at him so tight and sleep came up and

tried to mug him through the spinning in his head and body.

"Not leaving again," he muttered into the damp honey curls, holding Spike tighter to emphasize his point.

"Not leaving." Spike whispered into his chest.

"Kay," Xander said, yawning. "Promise."

"G'night, luv." Chaste brush of petal-soft lips, like butterfly wings.

Xander slid into sleep like Mark McGuire at third base, the most restful slumber he'd had since Spike left, arms full of vampire, body exhausted and sated, back miraculously cured.

He didn't wake up once before morning.

The End