

*Pairing: Spike/Xander*

*Rating: NC-17*

*Disclaimer: I'm not Joss*

*Summary: In an alternate universe, Spike went to Angel instead of Sunnydale after earning his soul. That didn't turn out well for Spike.*

*Warning: dub-con*

*Author's Note: Many thanks to my lovely beta, [👤silk labyrinth!](#)*

# Mouse

by

[Whichclothes](#)

## Part One

The little mouse lived in a hole, you see. It was a tiny thing, timid and shaking. But no matter how very quietly it cowered in the deep, dusty dark, the cat always found it and dragged it out to play. The cat *always* did.

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Angel grunted twice and collapsed on top of Spike's

bent body, forcing the air from Spike's lungs in a noisy *whoosh*. Spike didn't bother trying to refill them; he just lay still until Angel removed himself with a wet squelching noise and stood.

"Get out," Angel said expressionlessly as he fastened his trousers.

Spike suppressed a moan as he straightened himself—a broken rib or two this time, he reckoned, something poking sharply at his insides. He started toward the little pile of clothing in the corner, but glimpsed one of Angel's broad fingers hovering over his watch. "Get *out*."

Spike flinched. "My kit—"

"*Out!*" This time Angel's response was a roar, and his finger moved a bit closer to the button on the side of the timepiece.

Spike scurried out of the office.

He tried to hold his head high as he walked down the hallway, he really did. He hadn't been ashamed of his own nudity since William's days; in fact, he'd been

known to flaunt it from time to time. But now his curls were snarled, his face swollen, his chest bruised and painful. His inner thighs were glazed with blood and semen, and he couldn't help but limp due to the tearing pain in his arse. His cock drooped between his legs, encased in a clear plastic chastity cage that made his bollocks ache and kept him from getting hard.

He kept his eyes focused on his dirty bare feet, but he could feel the eyes of the people in suits, their gazes crawling over his naked skin like worms on a corpse. He wasn't permitted to use the lifts, and it was a long walk from the CEO's office to the back stairway. His footsteps whispered against the cool cement as he descended, and his nose tickled from the reek of the janitors' cleaning fluids. As he reached the landings he could catch a glimpse of sunlight through the little pebbled-glass windows in each door. Just a glimpse, though. He hadn't really seen the out of doors in... a very long time.

He reached the basement—or *a* basement, at least; he had the idea that there were more beneath him—where the fluorescent lights flickered sickly above plain white walls and a plain white floor. Always made him a bit dizzy. Dizzier.

The door to his room—his cell—was open. He went inside, shutting the door, hearing the lock click into place. Letting out a small sigh of relief. Even though now he was truly trapped and wouldn't be allowed out of his hidey-hole until Angel sent for him again, the little room gave him at least the illusion of safety.

The room was spartan. Gray concrete floor, walls, and ceiling, with a single bare lightbulb hanging dead center. A metal cot with a thin mattress, a thinner blanket, and a lumpy pillow. There was a drain set into the floor in one corner of the room, and above it was a narrow shower head. A cake of soap, a cheap comb, and a plastic bottle of the poncy shampoo Angel fancied were on a nearby shelf. A threadbare towel hung from a hook. He always heard a low humming sound when he was in his room, and he wasn't sure if the sound came from some sort of machinery—air compressors, perhaps—or from his own skull.

He wasn't permitted a telly or even a radio. Maybe that was just as well, seeing as he had plenty of voices nattering in his head already.

Angel had granted him only one concession, and that

fairly recently: a small stack of paperback books was piled carefully under the bed. Peaches had chosen them, most likely to teach Spike some sort of obscure lesson, and they weren't to Spike's taste. Sartre, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard. Saint Augustine. James bloody Joyce. But they were words on paper and when the hours crawled by and the cacophony in Spike's brain faded enough for him to grow bored, the books felt like his last anchor to sanity. He'd memorized them and the pages were falling from the bindings, but still he reread them.

Now, however, he padded to the corner of the cell and he turned the squeaky metal knob as far as it would go. A trickle of frigid water fell reluctantly onto the floor. He'd long ago learned that there was nothing he could do to increase either the temperature or the water pressure, so now he stood underneath it, shivering, trying to sluice away the filth. He stood so long that his legs gave out. He huddled and rocked himself and, as the roar began in his head, he hoped vaguely that the water would fill him, fill everything. Drown the lot

## Part Two

Xander shifted in the back seat of the SUV and sighed heavily. “Jesus, this is stupid.”

Faith grinned at him that way she did—that way that always made him feel really uncomfortable—and patted his knee. “Chill, Xanny Boy. We’re cool.”

“We are *not* cool. This is *Angel* we’re paying a visit to, and that is miles and miles from cool.”

She shrugged, unconcerned. “He talked me down from a ledge. I trust him.”

“He also tortured Giles and murdered Ms. Calendar and screwed with Buffy. And oh yeah, tried to end the world. I don’t trust him.”

Willow twisted her head around to look back at him—and how come she got to sit in the front seat, while he was stuck in the back with Faith? “He didn’t have his soul then,” Willow said. As if soul-having was the answer to everything.

Xander, having learned at least a few survival tactics over the years, refrained from pointing out that Willow had a soul too, the time *she* tried to end the world. “If he’s so soulish, what’s he doing running an evil law firm?”

It was Faith who answered. “Conquer from within. It’s an old maneuver.”

“Yeah? So’s going over to the dark side,” Xander muttered. But he knew he wasn’t going to win this argument. He hadn’t won it the last eight or nine hundred times either. Faith was all *Yay Angel!* and Willow kept going on about some girl named Fred and was willing to believe whatever this Fred person said—and it was pretty damn clear that Willow had a massive crush on her which, well, good for her, but Xander didn’t want to end up dead over it.

They’d been hearing rumors about the whole law firm thing for a while, and everyone had been sort of dithering over what to do about it. The answer was pretty damn clear to Xander—take out Angel—and Giles was on his side, but of course Buffy couldn’t pull the trigger. And with Faith backing Buffy up, the other

Slayers followed neatly in line. So they'd settled on keeping a close eye on him, which Xander thought was a sucky plan, especially since it was hard to keep a close anything on a vamp in LA when Slayers Inc. had set up shop in Florida. Thus the need for the current field trip. And because Xander was the loudest about having no confidence in Angel, he got recruited to tag along.

As if she were reading his thoughts—and maybe she was—Willow smiled comfortingly at him. “It’s okay, Xan. Fred says he’s still wearing a white hat.”

“That’d mess up his hair,” Xander said, effectively ending the discussion by studiously looking through the window at Los Angeles. It looked more depressing than ever: rich people showing off their bad taste in a desperate attempt to be noticed, poor people scraping by. It was all Botox and plastic and sparkly lights covered in filth, and Christ, wasn’t he in a lovely mood today? The predawn flight hadn't helped.

“Almost there,” said Kennedy from the driver’s seat. She wanted to be here even less than Xander, but she’d clearly caught the Fred-crush vibes too and wasn’t about to let Willow out of her sight. The only joy

Xander was getting out of the deal was watching the bitchy, scrunched-up face Kennedy made every time Willow mentioned Fred.

The law firm was housed in a looming building with very little architectural appeal. There was a parking garage in the back, stuffed full of BMWs and Mercedes and the kind of shiny black SUVs favored by dictators. Kennedy found an empty spot and the four of them piled out. The girls adjusted their clothing, and out of habit Xander reached to adjust the eye patch that was no longer there. He'd only been wearing the acrylic eye for a couple of months and he wasn't sure he was crazy about it. Every time he caught his reflection in a mirror, his face looked weird. Well, maybe he just had a weird face.

The lobby didn't look evil. It was clearly intended to impress, with expensive furniture and expensive art, and an expensive-looking blonde behind the counter. "May I help you?" she asked.

All three of Xander's companions gave the receptionist's impressive boobs an assessing look. Xander did not. He'd been living with females long enough to have learned to look them in the eyes

instead of the chest. “We have an appointment with Fred Burkle,” Willow said.

The blonde tapped for a moment at a computer hidden behind the desk. “Your name, please?”

“Rosenberg.”

More tapping, and then a nod. “Yes, all right. An intern will show you to the conference room.” She waved her hand and a short young man appeared. He was a couple years younger than Xander and looked uncomfortable in a suit and tie. He also looked like he thought he ought to be doing something a lot more important than playing guide dog. Then Xander noticed the odd shape of his ears, and the way Kennedy and Faith were both frowning at him. Ah. Not human. But also apparently not lethal, because he was docile enough as he led them to an elevator and up to the fourth floor.

As promised, he took them to a conference room. It wasn't a very big one and there were no windows, but the table looked like mahogany and the chairs were really comfortable. “Ms. Burkle will be right with you,” he squeaked. “Do you want some coffee or

something?”

They all shook their heads and he hurried away.

“See?” Willow said to Xander. She was smiling like a mother trying to convince her child that a trip to the dentist would be fun. “Nothing’s tried to kill us yet.”

He scowled and knocked twice on the table.

As it turned out, Fred was adorable. She was tiny and wearing a lab coat, and she had a cute accent and she gave Willow such a bubbly greeting and enthusiastic hug that Xander was certain Kennedy was going to stake her. But Kennedy didn’t; she even calmed down a little when Fred seated herself between Xander and Faith.

“Y’all must be tired after such a long trip,” Fred said.

“We want a tour of the place,” Xander replied sternly. Willow glared at him and kicked his shin, making him yelp.

Fred didn’t seem perturbed. “Sure. Not much to see, mostly. Just lawyer stuff. My lab’s pretty nifty, though.

But maybe y'all want to ask me some questions first.”

Faith leaned back in her chair and nodded. “Yeah, okay. What’s the deal with the big guy? Good guy or bad?”

“Oh! Definitely good. But Wolfram and Hart has been bitin' his butt for years, so when the chance came up to actually join the firm, we figured we could do more good from inside. Y’know, so we could watch them up close, maybe steer ’em away from the bad stuff.”

Willow looked like she was going to say something, but Xander beat her to the punch. “Yeah, keep your friends close and your enemies closer. I saw *The Godfather* too. But then there’s that saying about power corrupting, and I know Angel. He’s pretty corruptible, I’d say.”

“We’re doing a whole lotta good here,” Fred replied firmly.

“And Deadboy’s not being tempted by the powers of evil?”

“This isn’t a comic book!” Willow snapped at him. He was going to reply with something nasty, but then

Willow jumped a little and he realized Kennedy had kicked her this time. Hah. Score one for Kennedy, for a change.

“Look, y’all.” Fred held up her hands to make peace. “I know Angel’s a demon. Believe me, I’ve *seen* what he’s got inside that hunky package. But he’s a good guy, he really is. He’s tryin' real hard.”

To Xander’s surprise, Faith leaned forward, her brows raised in a *Really? Don’t bullshit me* expression. “He’s still gotta be feeling the pull of temptation, Freddy. How’s he holding up?”

Fred sort of folded her lips inward and her eyes went a little shifty. “He has... an outlet.”

“An outlet?” Faith asked.

“Yeah. A way to... to work out his... urges.”

“A hobby,” Faith said. “Like knitting or fantasy football?”

“Nooo.... It’s... something not very nice. But he’s not hurting anyone—not anyone *good*—and it’s working

for him so we all kinda let it slide. It's kinda his own family business anyway.”

Xander exchanged looks with the others. “Family business?” he finally said.

Fred looked very uncomfortable, but nodded. “I guess you're gonna want to see, huh?”

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Xander tried not to stare as they made their way through the building. Quite a few demons seemed to work at the firm, but they weren't the ones he wondered about. As far as he was concerned, demons at an evil law firm made perfect sense, just like demons at a dentist office or in Congress. What interested him were the humans. They looked pretty ordinary, just men and women in suits, carrying papers and talking into cell phones. He wondered what lured them to work in this place. Had they known what they were getting into? Did they care? 'Cause yeah, he'd figured out long ago that human DNA didn't automatically make someone a paragon of virtue—hell, he'd learned that from his very own parents—but he still didn't quite understand what led people to give themselves

over to evil. Especially the minions, the ones who had to know they were never going to be top dog, never going to rule the world. What was in it for them?

He didn't get any answers to these questions as they walked down the hallway and squeezed into an elevator. The elevator was playing Britney Spears. They rode down to a floor marked B2, but Xander couldn't help but notice that there were also floors B3 through B9, and he wondered why so many underground levels were necessary. He couldn't think of an explanation that wasn't unsettling.

B2 was a long white hallway lined with unmarked doors. Their footsteps echoed strangely and he noticed that even perky Fred looked pretty subdued. She stopped in front of one of the gray doors and held her thumb to a sensor near the knob. A lock clicked loudly; she swung the door open.

Somewhat hesitantly, Xander and the other visitors clustered close to see what was inside.

Willow and Xander gasped in unison, and Xander yelled, "Spike!"

### **Part Three**

His brain itched, deep inside where the chip sent out electronic tentacles and danced its silicon dances. He scratched his head until his hair was caked with blood and his fingernails were broken, but the infuriating tickle wouldn't stop. The burning in his chest wouldn't stop either—his skin there was marred by deep gouges, but they were never deep enough. And the voices nattered on, screaming, laughing, blaming; and his arse was torn from Angel's recent attentions; and his belly was hollow.

He crouched in the damp corner of his cell, rocking himself and holding himself tight, attempting in vain to find some faint comfort in his own arms.

He didn't notice when the door opened. Loads of things like that got past him nowadays, his attention turned too far inward or his despair too deep for clear sight. But he heard the gasps and the startled exclamation of

his name, and he looked up, wondering what torture was to come next.

But before he could focus his eyes, the scent hit him and he hissed and pressed back against the cold concrete wall. Slayers. Not *the* Slayer, not the girl, but Slayers nonetheless. Was this how Angel had decided to end him, some sort of balance for past crimes? “Doesn’t matter,” he said. His voice was cracked from screaming or disuse; he wasn’t sure which. “Won’t bring the others back, the one worried about her mother and the other about her son. Oh, and the *taste* of them....” He shuddered in remembered ecstasy and newfound repugnance, and then laughed a broken little laugh. “All dust now. Dust to dust.”

Dust. It was a soft word, deep and whispery like the grave itself. Soothing, really, and peaceful. Enticing enough to make him ignore the pain that would come after—fire, the priests would have it, but he knew that true hell was cold and hard, like a tomb, like a concrete cell, like a vampire’s shriveled heart.

He crawled on all fours and stopped just short of the doorway, his head hanging. He was naked and wet and ripped to pieces. “Just do it,” he whispered. “Bloody *do*

it. Please.”

But nobody staked him, and after the shocked silence dragged out like a fisherman’s line, he was captured, hooked by his own curiosity. He lifted his head again. That’s when he realized he recognized the other two visitors, the ones who weren’t Slayers. One was the girl with the ginger hair, the one he’d tried to bite after he was first chipped. The one who tried to end the world with her magic. And beside her was the boy, because the boy was always there, wasn’t he? His dark fringe was flopping in his face, not quite hiding the oddness of his left eye.

“Spike?” the boy said again. “What the fuck?”

Spike sat back on his heels and laughed until tears flowed. “The fuck. That’s the rub, innit? The rub and the fuck and the *pain* and if you won’t make it bloody stop then bugger off. I’d prefer to be barmy by myself.”

He turned around—still no energy to stand so he crawled again—and dragged himself to the cot. He remained on the floor with his back to the door, and he curled himself into the smallest, tiniest ball he could,

until he was nothing, not a man, not a mouse, not even a speck of dust.

## **Part Four**

Everyone looked a little pale, even Faith, and Xander wished that the cup in front of him held something stronger than coffee. “What the fuck?” he asked for the zillionth time.

Fred sighed. They were back in the conference room, sitting in their same chairs as if following a seating chart. “If it makes any difference, I don’t think most of Spike’s injuries are from Angel. He does them to himself.”

“But... why? How?” Xander could still see the vampire: skin very pale next to shockingly red wounds, crawling around in the nude and spouting nonsense.

“It was a couple years ago, I guess,” Fred answered, staring into the depths of her teacup. “Before we came

here. We were staying in Angel's hotel—you remember, Willow, right?"

Willow nodded. The corners of her mouth were turned down and she looked as tired as Xander felt.

Fred nodded back and continued her story. "One night the door opened and this vampire came stumbling in. Charles was about to shoot him with a crossbow, but Angel stopped him at the last second. Spike looked *awful*, even for a vampire, and he wasn't making any sense—well, you heard how he is. He kept going on about a spark and voices and I don't know what all. Angel decided to lock him up until he could figure out what was going on."

"What *was* going on?" asked Kennedy.

"I'm not sure. I don't know if Angel ever got a straight story from Spike, and he didn't really want to share with us. I know Spike did something really awful to Buffy, right?"

Xander and Willow exchanged quick looks and then Xander said, "He tried to rape her."

Fred didn't look especially surprised. "Demons, right?"

"No, this was... kind of different. These government guys did something to his brain and he was kind of harmless. Annoying but harmless. And things with Buff...." He looked at Willow again and she shrugged. "She was having a tough time of things, on account of having been dead and all. She and Spike had some kind of sick... fling, I guess. But when she broke it off he tried to force her."

"She fought him," Willow added. "And then he took off. None of us heard from him since."

Fred said, "Well, whatever happened to him in between sure mixed up his brain. But Angel didn't want to kill him, and he wasn't really bothering anyone, down in the basement like that. Most of the time I... I kind of forgot he was there. We were usually pretty busy."

Xander took a sip of his coffee, which was lukewarm. "Know how that goes," he mumbled. He hadn't really thought about Spike since he'd disappeared either; good riddance had been his main conclusion. And then there was the whole end of the world thing to think

about, and all the baby Slayers, and the missing eye, and then Angel brought Buffy that ugly necklace and Sunnydale went *kaboom* and Anya died and they moved to Florida and... and a certain bleached blond vamp hadn't been anywhere near the top of Xander's list.

"So when we came here," Fred continued, "Angel brought Spike. They already had lots of... secure places in the building, so that was easy. Angel had some of the guys in the lab work on that chip, too. Upgrading it, he said."

"Upgrading?" Willow asked.

"Yeah. Now Angel can set it off with this controller he wears, or he can set a timer. Like, if Spike doesn't get back to his cell fast enough, or..." Her voice trailed away and she sighed again. "Angel said it makes Spike safer. I didn't work on it, though. I think it's kinda creepy."

Faith had been tapping her fingers on the table, but now she stopped. "So Spike is Angel's stress relief, huh? He fucks him and then everything's all good?"

Xander unwillingly pictured what Spike had looked like as he crawled away from them. His asshole had been inflamed and crusted with dried blood, and his pale ass cheeks had been striped with angry red welts. And that... thing he had locked over his dick. Xander had seen stuff like that during some of his X-rated online browsing. He supposed it was fine for people who were into it willingly, people who got a kick out of it. But he had the feeling Spike wasn't wearing it because he wanted to.

Did this make up for what Spike tried to do to Buffy? A rape for a rape? Not really, Xander concluded. But he wasn't pleased to learn that Spike was suffering. Torture wasn't Xander's gig. It was Angel's, however.

Fred was talking, going on about how she was really sorry for Spike, even if he was a demon, and how her pals felt the same way, but everyone agreed it was all for the best. A small sacrifice for the greater good. Xander rubbed his face next to the fake eye—sometimes small sacrifices hurt like a bitch. None of this was making him trust Angel any more deeply, either.

But while everyone in the room seemed to agree that

what Angel was doing to Spike was pretty squick-worthy, nobody really thought it was enough to declare war over. Besides, Fred said, it could be worse. Angel had other prisoners, like some ex-lawyer guy who'd tried to kill him a bunch of times and was pretty much a wild card, and who was kept locked up—albeit in slightly more luxurious quarters, and without getting fucked or beaten.

They went on the promised tour of the building. Most of it was as boring as Fred had claimed, although the labs did look very nifty. Xander noticed that they didn't explore floors B3 through B9. The last stop on the tour was Angel's office. Xander was startled to recognize the receptionist, and even more startled when Harmony gave him a big hug. She hugged Willow too, which made Kennedy reach for her stake, but Fred calmed everyone down again and Harmony went back to sorting Post-its.

Angel was waiting for them, seated behind a big desk. He looked the same as ever, only wearing a suit. He even had a small smile for Faith, who *Hey youed* him back. But Xander kept seeing the other vampire, the one downstairs, and imagining Angel doing those things to him, and all Xander could do was scowl.

“Look, I don’t want to hurry you guys,” Angel was saying. “But I’ve got a meeting soon and there’s these contracts I have to look over.... So do you have any questions? Are you satisfied that we’re on the up-and-up here?”

Xander and his companions exchanged uncomfortable looks, and it was Faith who finally spoke. “Looks copacetic, big guy. Mostly. But we were down in the basement....”

Angel flashed Fred an angry look, very quickly, but she didn’t back down. Then he rolled his eyes. “That’s just Spike. He’s not important. And he doesn’t have anything to do with what’s going on here.”

“He was pretty banged up.”

“He’s a vamp; he’ll heal. Anyway, he does that stuff to himself. Unless you want me to keep him in a straightjacket or something, and that’d be even less humane, right?”

Xander wanted to ask whether Spike had raped himself too, but didn’t. He didn’t want to give Angel advice on

being humane either. "It's pretty sick," he said.

Angel's eyes flashed. "You know what he did to Buffy. You know."

"Sure. And I also know that Kennedy and Fred are the only people in this room who never tried to hurt Buff. Or kill her."

Willow and Faith blinked at that, as if they'd never thought of it that way, but Angel only frowned.

"Doesn't matter. Spike doesn't matter. What matters is what we're doing here." He waved his arms around.

"We're gonna win this war, Xander. And I'd really appreciate help from you guys. Or at least no opposition."

Xander was going to argue, but just then the door opened and in walked a colorfully dressed green demon, a handsome black guy in a suit, and Faith's former Watcher. There were introductions, a really awkward reunion and, for some reason that Xander sort of missed, singing. Then people started plotting strategies and Spike seemed to be forgotten.

Xander stood off by himself, half-listening to the conversation and gazing out over the city as dusk fell.

## **Part Five**

Sometimes someone was kind to him. He had the idea that they weren't meant to be, that Angel had expressly forbidden it. And really, Spike didn't deserve kindness. But sometimes as he rushed from his cell to his sire's office, or stumbled back, someone would smile gently at him or even say hello. That pretty little girl—Fred—she often did that. Once Harmony snuck him some of the poof's otter blood, which was loads better than the pig he was usually given. On another day, that former Watcher stopped him in the stairwell as he was hurrying back to the basement and handed him a worn volume of Shakespeare's tragedies. Even managed to keep a look of pity or disgust off his face over Spike's bruised, bare body.

Spike couldn't quite make his throat work to thank these people. If he'd said even a single word he might have broken down in tears, and he was trying so bloody hard not to do that. He sobbed in his cell sometimes, but not in front of anyone else. He believed that if he allowed himself to cry in front of an audience, the last

pieces of himself would be washed away in salty water, and all that would remain would be a shambling shell.

But when he was alone, huddled under his scratchy blanket on his thin mattress, with the light off and the building thrumming around him, he thought about those kindnesses. He turned them over and over in his head, like shiny jewels. He'd done nothing to earn them. He'd been a monster for so very long, as the voices constantly reminded him. But he treasured those jewels nonetheless.

He had loads of time to think. Most of the time his mind wasn't clear enough for it, but in his more lucid moments he thought about his recent visitors. Slayers who hadn't staked him, and a witch, and the boy. Had they told Buffy what had become of him, and was she glad to hear it?

He wondered if it would make a difference if any of them knew the secret that he and Angel shared. Spike had regained his soul—won it back, although he wasn't certain why he'd tried—and it burned and burned inside him.

## Part Six

Xander missed the West Coast—especially after their recent, if short, visit there. In theory, Florida was like California. Sunshine, ocean, tourists. But the reality was different, because Florida also had humidity, annoying bugs, and hurricanes.

His living situation wasn't completely miserable, however. Andrew had scoured eBay and found what was to become their headquarters. It had once been a resort, located near a long sandy beach not far from Cape Canaveral, but the company had gone belly-up years ago and Giles was able to buy the place without digging too painfully into the Council's budget. Most of the buildings were in poor repair, but that was fine—Xander was kept happily busy fixing things up, and a few of the Slayers were pretty handy with tools too. Almost everyone had his or her own cozy little bungalow, except for those who preferred to share, and it had been easy to convert the former clubhouse into a gym, training arena, and meeting space. They even had a classroom rigged up for Slayers who wanted

some online education, and Willow and Giles had outfitted a passable research library. Best of all, though, at the end of a hot and sweaty day Xander could walk two minutes over some grassy dunes, jump in the lukewarm ocean, and swim the kinks out of his body.

Unfortunately, there were certain kinks that swimming could never work out of his body. The nearest place to deal with those kinks was an hour away in Orlando, and he didn't often have the time or the energy for that.

Ever since sophomore year, he'd kind of had an idea in the back of his head that he might be interested in guys. He'd caught himself checking out his teammates' Speedos once too often. And that idea had been confirmed during his stint in Oxnard. Not that he didn't like girls too, because he really did. It was only that he spent so much time around the estrogen brigade that after a while he'd find himself hungry for the company of someone with a Y-chromosome—someone who wasn't a father figure or Andrew.

So once every month or so, Xander made up an excuse about needing supplies and climbed into his pickup truck. Giles knew what he was really up to—a

squirmingly uncomfortable but mercifully brief conversation about safe sex practices confirmed that—but if any of the girls suspected, they didn't seem to care. Xander would honestly stop at Home Depot or somewhere and fill the back of his truck with stuff, but then he'd drive to Dan's Dive Club or Orbits or The Juke. He was young and willing and reasonably good-looking, so he always got what he was looking for.

Problem was, he was beginning to think he was looking for the wrong thing.

He had just finished his monthly getaway and the truck's cab smelled like beer and sweat and come. Strike that—*Xander* smelled like beer and sweat and come. He lowered the window, allowing the sticky night air to come rushing in as he sped down the highway toward Smugglers Cove. Which was a stupid name for a resort—no wonder the place had failed. A few months earlier, Andrew had tried to have a contest to rename their compound, but gave up when all the entries were obscene. Xander's dick chafed against the confines of his clothing. He'd fucked two men that night—a Cuban with a delightfully round ass and a college kid with a sunburn—and he'd sucked off a slender guy with a red dress and an impressively long

cock. But he didn't feel satisfied.

Even though it was late when he arrived back at the Cove, there was a fair amount of activity going on in the main parking lot. A few of the newer Slayers had gone on their first real demon hunt and they were all worked up about it, whooping and laughing and kicking the air. The more experienced Slayers watched with sadness in their eyes, because they knew it wouldn't always be such easy pickings for these girls; sooner or later, some of them would be killed. And then more would show up to take their places.

That was the deal, apparently. After Sunnydale, Buffy and Giles had led the group here to set up shop. Willow made some kind of mystical beacon that drew the newly chosen right to them. The new girls were given a few months of training and then sent back out into the world, to patrol wherever patrolling was needed. Not a bad gig, really. It seemed to be working. The world hadn't ended yet, anyway.

"Hey! Xander! Come join us!" called one of the younger girls. She had brunette pigtails and a pretty obvious crush on the resident carpenter. "We got tequila!"

“Aren’t you underage?” he yelled back.

“If you’re old enough to slay, you’re old enough to drink.”

She had a point, Xander thought. “Sorry, Cami. I’m beat. You guys have fun though.” He waved at her and then trudged across the still-warm blacktop, past a small stand of scrub palmettos, and to his own faded yellow door. The walls of his little house were an equally faded aqua, although that wasn’t obvious in the dim light. He’d been thinking lately that maybe he should repaint the place, not to change the color but rather to brighten it up.

Inside his bungalow he had wicker furniture with tropical print cushions. Not exactly his taste, but Andrew had gotten a really good deal on a couple truckloads of the stuff. Xander turned on the AC but not the living room lights, kicked off his sandals, and padded to the larger bedroom. It felt good to strip out of his sweat-stiff clothing, even better to stand under the water in his slightly mildewed shower. After a cursory rub with the towel, he climbed into bed, listening to the whir of the ceiling fan and the quiet *thuds* of a moth against the window. A lizard had been

living in his bedroom for a while, a cute little gray-spotted gecko that hung out near the ceiling and sometimes squeaked during the night. He'd named it George. Maybe George would have moth for dinner tonight. It was a thought that made Xander smile.

But when he closed his eyes, the smile faded. Behind his shut lids—even behind the one with the missing eye—he saw the same thing he'd been seeing for weeks. A pale, bloodied vampire, too thin, crawling around in a concrete cell and begging for final death.

He'd spoken to Giles about the situation, but Giles only polished his glasses and looked grave, and concluded that it was probably best to have Spike out of the way. Xander thought he might have more luck with Willow—she'd *seen* Spike, after all—but his old friend had grown a little more hard-hearted lately, a little more practical, and she just shook her head at him.

Finally, in desperation, Xander spoke to Buffy. He knew that Willow and Faith had reported to her what they'd seen at the law firm. When Xander raised the subject, her lips thinned and her eyes went flat. “He’s a vampire, Xan. He can handle it. Besides, it’s Spike. He’s probably ask— Even a saint would be tempted to

smash him in the face.”

“Wasn’t his face Angel’d been smashing, Buff,” Xander replied mildly. He was remembering all the bruises and gashes Spike had sported a few years earlier, back when he and Buffy were fooling around. How many of those bruises had Buffy put there, and did she justify them the same way Angel was?

Xander was no fan of Spike, but he also didn’t approve of making a punching bag out of someone helpless. That distaste came from painful personal experience.

Buffy’s face went as hard as her eyes. “Nothing we can do,” she said, and turned away.

So now every night Xander fretted, which was stupid. He shouldn’t be losing sleep over a vampire. But he kept picturing Spike nonetheless, and remembering the strangely vulnerable set of his shoulders when he’d been freshly chipped. Not that Xander had cared back then. Not that he *should* care now, he kept reminding himself.

George squeaked and Xander rolled over, but sleep was a long time coming.

## Part Seven

*Crack!* A new line of fire bloomed across his back. His skin must be hanging in tatters by now, he thought. He wondered if the bones were visible too, and the next strike of the whip brought a gale of laughter.

“What’s so feekin’ funny?” Angel growled. He sounded slightly out of breath. Probably hadn’t been getting enough exercise lately.

Spike wiggled a bit, trying to ease the strain where his cuffed wrists were holding his weight. “Won’t work.”

Angel hit him again, this time across the arse. “*What won’t work?*”

“Can’t expiate your sins with my flesh.” Spike laughed again.

“I’m not trying to expiate anything!” Angel snapped. He

brought the whip down to emphasize his point—  
against Spike's thighs—and then across his shoulders.

Spike was in terrible pain, but that was all right. He was used to this sort of pain. He'd endured it for decades, from Angelus, from Dru when she was in the right mood, from Glory and Buffy and the Immortal and countless others. It meant nothing to him. It was almost welcome now, because while his nerve cells sang with pain, he could almost ignore the real torture: the fire in his chest, the coldness in his soul.

Eventually, Angel's arm must have grown tired. He stopped flogging Spike and unlocked the manacles, allowing Spike to fall to the carpet with a thud and a groan. He toed at Spike's flank. "Go away," he said, because he'd already fucked him, sometime halfway through the whipping.

Spike tried to climb to his feet, but got only as far as his knees before he wobbled and fell over. Angel glowered down at him, and for a horrible moment Spike thought he was going to be forced to crawl back to his cell in the basement. But Angel just kicked him lightly and said, "I want you gone as soon as you can walk."

Spike curled on his side and listened as his sire clomped back behind his desk and began to shuffle papers. The carpet was an expensive one, much more comfortable than his cell floor. It was stained with blood now, though. But the room was pleasantly warm, and if he angled his face just right he could see through the necrotinted window at the yellowish LA sky. Necrotinting was a brilliant invention. He wished the law firm's scientists would spend more time on things like that, and less on making a more devious behavior control chip.

"I would have helped you, you know," Spike said quietly after a time. Angel didn't answer him, but there was a slight pause in the scratch-scratch of pen on paper, and Spike knew he'd heard. "Would've been your ally."

"I don't need an ally like you."

Spike coughed and moaned a bit at the way the movement irritated his wounds. "Need all the allies you can get, mate. Seems to me."

"I would never have trusted you."

With a soft laugh, Spike shifted slightly on the carpet. “You could have, though. ’M a trustworthy sort.”

Angel snorted, but the sound lacked conviction. He knew the truth. Even with the voices in his head—hell, even before the soul—if Spike said he’d do something, he bloody well did it. Not that anyone seemed to notice, or to care.

He let his eyes fall shut and tried to sleep away the pain.

## **Part Eight**

While the faces in the room were serious, there was also an undercurrent of excitement. This group liked a good fight, and it certainly seemed as if they had a doozy ahead of them. Giles, Faith, and Buffy went over the battle plans for the tenth time, but Xander zoned out. With a whole army of Slayers at their disposal, plus a witch or two, everyone had long since concluded that a one-eyed carpenter didn’t add much to their arsenal.

Xander had given up feeling hurt about it, especially since it meant his hide had an improved likelihood of staying intact. He knew that keeping the Cove in good physical shape was important and valued, and something he did better than anyone else, and that was good enough for him.

But even though he wasn't going to be anywhere near the big battle, he still wasn't spared the strategy sessions. So he sat in his chair and tried to stay awake as his friends blathered on.

"But is Angel positive they're gonna throw everything they've got at him on this particular day?" Kennedy was asking.

Buffy shrugged. "As positive as he can get. And they don't suspect we're coming. That's important. They'll be throwing everything they have at Angel and his group, and they'll never notice us coming up behind them."

"We hope," Faith added.

"Yeah. We hope." Another shrug. "Will's cloaking spell ought to keep us hidden until the last second."

Kennedy clicked her tongue piercing against the barrel of her pen while she thought. “And just outside the firm’s HQ is really the best place for this?”

“Angel thinks so.”

Giles chimed in, “There should be, be less collateral damage this way as well. Few civilians are likely to be in the vicinity at that time of night.”

Everyone else seemed to like that point—there was a lot of head nodding around the table. But Giles’ comment had set Xander’s sluggish brain in motion, and Xander wasn’t all that pleased with its destination. “What about Spike?” he asked loudly.

All the heads swiveled around, all the eyes stared at him.

“Angel’s got him locked up in that building. If things go *boom* or *whoosh* or any other major sound effect, what happens to Spike?”

After a long pause, Giles shook his head. “We can’t worry about him, Xander. Wolfram and Hart is a

formidable enemy. This is war.”

“Yeah, I get that. But it’s not Spike’s war. It’s really not even ours, except we’ve decided to join the fun. But Spike kinda helped us out once or twice, right? Like with Dawn?” Buffy ducked her head, looking a little guilty. Dawn was safely away at some fancy boarding school, and Buffy had forbidden anyone from telling her anything important.

“I, I understand your concern,” Giles said. “But what do you propose we do?”

“We tell Angel to hand Spike over before the battle begins.”

“Hand him over to whom? I understand Spike is in poor condition mentally as well as physically. We can’t spare anyone to, to babysit him.”

Xander looked at all the staring eyes, cursed himself for being an idiot, and said, “We can spare me.”

## **Part Nine**

Angel hadn't used him for ages. That wasn't a relief. Spike's cell had stopped being a refuge; it was haunted now with thousands of voices, shadows and shades and phantoms that wouldn't shut up, wouldn't ever shut up.

He tried to be a little mouse, a quiet little thing in the corner that nobody would notice. People didn't much mind mice, unless they ran about or got into the cupboards. They weren't big and nasty, like rats. So he didn't run about. He hardly moved from his cold, hard corner.

Didn't work, though. He was still afraid. And what truly terrified him wasn't Angel's abuse, weren't the ghosts that haunted him. What made him shake and tremble was the notion of being unwanted, forgotten. Alone. Because who would want him, a monster with a broken body and broken mind?

So when the lock clicked open, Spike didn't have to be goaded by the chip to rise quickly to his feet, to rush down the corridor, to stumble up the stairs as quickly as he could. He barely glanced at the pebbled windows in passing, noticing absently that the sunlight had a late afternoon glow. The fact that the hallway leading to Angel's office was strangely deserted hardly registered.

Perhaps everyone was at a meeting of some sort, or perhaps today was a weekend or a holiday. He hadn't kept track of the passage of time for... years. Perhaps. He wasn't sure.

Harmony wasn't seated outside Angel's office, which was a bit odd. But Spike didn't pause to find out why—he pushed the door open and hurried inside.

Angel was standing there, looking very unhappy and holding a chain in his hand. Standing next to him, looking even less happy, was Xander Harris.

Without saying a word, Angel strode over. Spike was proud of himself for not flinching back, not even when Angel reached up with the chain. But all that the bigger vampire did was lock a metal collar around Spike's neck—the metal very cold—and give a few experimental tugs to the chain.

“Jesus, Angel. You don't have to leash him like a dog,” Xander said.

“If you think of him as a rabid dog you'll stay safer.”

Spike didn't dare argue, didn't even narrow his eyes in

protest. He didn't understand what was going on. Did his sire mean to have the boy fuck him now too? Or merely beat him?

Angel circled behind Spike, grabbed his wrists roughly, and cuffed them tightly enough that the metal dug into Spike's skin. "Well?" he said impatiently to Xander. "Get the hell out if you don't want to be in the middle of it."

"I'm not... I can't take him outside like *that*."

Outside? Spike's entire body quivered at the word and he bit his tongue to keep it silent.

Angel huffed. "Stick him in the trunk. Nobody will see."

"Jesus Christ," Xander said, and Spike wasn't sure whether his disgust was aimed at Spike or Angel. Xander walked over to the vampires—a bit hesitantly—and took the proffered leash. "C'mon," he mumbled, and turned to leave.

"Hang on." Angel unfastened his watch and held it out. "If he tries to hurt you the chip'll go off automatically—"

"Yeah, I know. I've seen."

“But if he gives you any problems you can set the chip off manually. Just press this button.”

“Wonderful.” Xander took the watch and put it on his own tanned wrist. He shot one last glare at Angel and then left the office, Spike in tow.

Naturally, Spike wanted to ask what the fuck was going on. But the boy had never fancied him, and now he had that bloody controller around his wrist, and Spike didn't want the chip to fire. He trotted along, obedient as any puppy. When they entered the lift, however, Xander sighed noisily and shrugged off his jacket. To Spike's enormous surprise, Xander tied the sleeves around Spike's waist, forming a crude kilt of sorts. “That's a little better,” Xander said with satisfaction.

Spike decided to risk a question. “Wh-where?” he whispered.

“Way the fuck away from here.”

Xander took him to a covered car park, then to a white Chevy, where Spike fully expected to be pushed into the boot, as Angel had suggested. Instead, Xander held open

the passenger door and helped Spike sit down. He even buckled the safety belt. “Do me a favor, okay? If I get pulled over for some reason, help me convince the cop that the bondage gear thing is all consensual.”

Spike nodded dumbly.

A moment later, Xander was in the driver’s seat, heading to the exit. When it fully dawned on Spike that he was being allowed to leave the building, to see something besides his cell and Angel’s office and the hallways in between, the voices in his head reached a roaring crescendo, his body began to shake, and his vision blurred.

He flinched when Xander patted his knee and then he curled up against himself, wishing his arms were free so he could hold them over his face defensively. But even though his head was a maelstrom, he could make out Xander’s quiet words: “It’s okay, Spike. You’re safe now.”

## Part Ten

Xander drove into the evening, and it was torture to stick to the speed limit, but he really, really didn't want to get pulled over and have to explain Spike. Spike was doing his best to curl into a fetal position—the chains, seatbelt, and bucket seat weren't helping—and he was making a terrible little keening noise that scraped along Xander's nerves like a cheese grater.

Great. Xander was trying to escape some kind of apocalypse in a rental car with a PTSD vampire riding shotgun.

He turned on the radio, trying to find something non-objectionable that might drown out Spike's noise and calm everyone's nerves, but all he could find was rap and religion, so he turned the radio off again. Eventually Spike went still and quiet, and it occurred to Xander that he should probably have removed the handcuffs before leaving LA. But he didn't want to pull over now, and he was afraid that if he touched Spike, the vampire would start that sound again.

So Xander kept on driving until his eye grew too bleary to see, and out in the middle of the desert somewhere he

found a shabby little motel with a neon vacancy sign. “Stay here,” he said to Spike as he pulled into the gravel lot. Spike didn’t respond.

It took only a few moments to check in, fork over some cash, and receive the old-fashioned door key, which hung from a faded plastic fob. He was oddly relieved to find Spike waiting for him in the Chevy. He led Spike into the room, glad that the parking lot was too dark for anyone to notice the nearly-naked chained man. The room smelled like cigarettes and cheap floral air freshener and looked to have been last updated circa 1972. There was only one bed. For some unfathomable reason, three paintings of ships at sea hung on the walls.

As Spike stood in the center of the room, his head hanging, Xander said, “Hold on.” He ran out to the car and fetched his duffle bag and the cooler full of cow blood he’d picked up at a grocery store on the way into town. “Are you hungry?” he asked when he reentered the room.

Spike nodded slightly. “Cheddar or Swiss?” he whispered, which didn’t make any sense, but then neither did much of Xander’s life.

Xander had to unlock the cuffs, and then he felt a little guilty when he saw the angry red marks around Spike's wrists. He unlatched the collar too, and threw the bondage gear aside. When Spike didn't move, Xander gently tugged him to the bed and pushed him until he sat on the mattress. Then Xander handed him a plastic container from the cooler. "Sorry. It's cold."

Spike didn't vamp out. He sipped his blood almost delicately, keeping his eyes cast down at the threadbare carpet. It was weird. Xander had seen him quiet before, but that was mostly quiet in a sneaky and menacing sort of way. Not... subdued. Shrunken.

Well, there was nothing Xander could do about that. And he was going to sit down and stare obsessively at his phone, waiting for someone to call and tell him that the battle was over and everyone was fine. But Spike shifted his legs slightly, giving Xander a look at his crotch, which reminded Xander about the damn cock cage.

"Uh..." Xander said, holding up the ring of keys Angel had begrudgingly given him. "I think maybe one of these might, um..." He waved ambiguously in the direction of his own groin.

By then, Spike had finished off his dinner. He set the empty carton on the nightstand and, after a slight hesitation, took the keys from Xander's outstretched hand. He didn't use them right away, however. "I... I can take the bloody thing off?" he asked, not meeting Xander's eye.

"Yeah. Of course. If you want to. I mean, I'm sure you want to, 'cause it's kind of... um.... Do whatever you want, okay?" And he scurried to the bathroom to piss and wash up.

When he came back, Spike was sitting in exactly the same place, the keys at his side and the plastic gadget lying on top of the discarded chains. "Do you want something to wear?" Xander asked. "My stuff's probably a little big, but I have some sweats."

Spike gave a small nod. "Ta."

After rooting around in his bag for a minute—how did things manage to hide so well in a relatively small space?—Xander unearthed gray sweatpants and a plain white tee, which he tossed to Spike. Spike untied the jacket from around his waist and put on the clothes, then sat again, looking even smaller and more lost than

before. And he was just waiting, like he didn't expect to be able to do anything without orders.

"Time for bed," Xander began.

And quick as a wink, the sweats were pushed down to Spike's ankles and the vampire was on elbows and knees on the bed, pale ass raised invitingly.

Xander made a slightly strangled sound and swallowed loudly. "What the fuck?"

Spike huddled into himself a little but kept his ass up. "D'you want me on my back instead?" he asked quietly.

"I'm not gonna fuck you!"

Spike looked over his shoulder at Xander, eyes wide with surprise. "'T's why you borrowed me, innit?"

"Why I...." Xander rubbed his forehead hard. "Pull up your pants, Spike. Let me explain without the gratuitous nudity."

Slowly, Spike complied. He ended up seated on the edge of the mattress again. Xander glanced at the dubious

stains on the room's only chair and sat down beside him. "I didn't borrow you, Spike, and I'm not gonna... use you."

Blue eyes stared at him, and for a brief moment he almost had a glimpse of the old Spike. Almost. "What do you want from me?" Spike asked.

"Nothing. I only.... There's going to be a big battle at the law firm. Probably already has been, actually. God, I hope it's over and everyone's okay." He glared at his phone. "But we thought you might be, um, safer far away from there."

"A mouse isn't safe even in its hole. Never."

"Um, okay." Xander said. He looked nervously at the floor, half-expecting to see a rodent or two, but he couldn't make out any wildlife in the room's dim light.

After a long pause, Spike asked, "How long until you bring me back?"

This was the part Xander hadn't exactly talked about with the others. He'd carefully avoided a discussion of After, because nobody was ever certain there was going

to be an After anyway. Assuming Angel survived whatever was going down in LA, Xander had no intention of returning Spike to Angel's clutches. On the other hand, it was gradually dawning on him that just telling Spike to run free like the wind wasn't going to work too well either. Spike looked like he'd last about five minutes without a babysitter.

"I'm not going to," Xander finally answered. And then, because he was no expert on vamp psychology, he added, "Unless you want me to."

Spike's eyes went wide. "You've nicked me?"

"Yes?" Xander answered unconvincingly. "Or kinda. I think I'd prefer the word *rescued*."

"No one rescues a monster."

"Idiots do."

And then, to Xander's enormous relief, his phone rang. "What!" he demanded into the tiny speaker.

Willow sounded exhausted and far away, but she sounded alive. "It's over."

“And?”

“We... we lost some people. A lot. There was a *dragon*, Xan.”

“Jesus.”

She sighed. “We won, though. And Buff’s okay. Giles got kinda scorched but he’ll heal. We won,” she repeated. She didn’t sound as enthusiastic about it as she might, but Xander was used to the let-down after a big fight, when you weren’t quite sure if the victory was worth the price you’d paid.

“How about Angel?”

“He’s banged up too, but he’ll heal. The building’s toast, though. The whole law firm’s toast. I think Faith is gonna stick around here for a while with some of Angel’s pals and get things settled.”

Xander felt every muscle in his body loosen. His friends weren’t all dead. Everything was going to be okay, at least for a while.

“Where are you, Xan? Are you gonna bring Spike back here tomorrow? Then we can all fly back home together.”

Xander glanced at Spike, who undoubtedly heard every word of both sides of the conversation, but who remained slumped. “He’s not going back.”

There was a long pause. “Angel’s gonna be... unhappy.”

“Don’t care. If the firm’s gone, he doesn’t need to... doesn’t need to torture Spike anymore.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I have no idea. But please tell Deadboy fuck you very much, okay?” He softened his tone. “Get some rest, Will. Take care of yourself.”

“You too.”

He closed the phone and set it aside. “I’m going to bed—uh, to sleep. Don’t run away, okay?”

“Can’t.”

“You’re not chained up anymore.”

Spike nodded his head at the watch Angel had given Xander, which was now on Xander’s wrist. “If I get too far from that the chip goes off.”

“Oh.”

Xander kicked off his shoes and socks, then stripped out of his shirt and boxers. He climbed between the scratchy, bleach-scented sheets. And then he took off the watch as well and set it next to the empty blood container on the bedside table before clicking off the light. He fell asleep too quickly to know what Spike might do next.

## **Part Eleven**

He sat in the darkness, listening to Xander snore, trying to put together a puzzle.

One of the pieces fit: there had been a big battle. Well,

Angel had been especially tense lately, as Spike's body could attest, and although he hadn't shared any confidences with Spike, it had been clear he was working on some scheme. Spike was relieved to learn that the firm had been defeated. While Angel's treatment of him at the Hyperion had hardly involved tender loving care, the true abuse hadn't begun until they'd moved to Wolfram & Hart. The evil in the place was palpable. It was like a stink you got in your clothes and couldn't wash out.

A second piece also made sense, although less so: the Scoobies had joined Angel in his fight. Perhaps that had something to do with the visit several weeks earlier, when Xander and the witch and the Slayer had gaped at Spike in his cell and refused to dust him. Fine. Good on them.

But then he came to the third piece, which didn't fit at all. Xander said he'd meant to rescue Spike. Why would he do such a thing? There had been no love lost between them even before... before Spike tried to hurt the girl.

And another thing—Xander hadn't tried to use Spike, not even when Spike offered himself. When Spike was first chipped and staying in Xander's horrid basement, he'd

unearthed the boy's porn cache. About half the magazines had featured big dicks instead of big tits. Spike hadn't said anything about it at the time; he'd been saving it up for when he needed blackmail material, or when he expected the reveal might do the most harm. And then he'd fallen for Buffy and the porn had no longer mattered. So Spike knew Xander fancied blokes, and he could smell a hint of arousal when he'd raised his arse. But even given such an easy opportunity—and perhaps also the chance to pay Spike back for attacking Buffy—Xander hadn't touched him.

In fact, Xander had been surprisingly decent to him all night. Hadn't once remarked on Spike's degradation or precarious mental state. Had seemed, in fact, almost... kind.

And now he'd removed the watch that controlled Spike's chip and left it unguarded on the nightstand, as if he trusted Spike with it. Nobody trusted Spike. Ever.

And the last piece of the puzzle was the oddest of all. Because Spike had been sitting on the bed for over an hour now, trying to make sense out of nonsense, and the voices had been quiet. Sitting on the lumpy mattress in the rathole of a motel, next to the snoring and snuffling

boy, Spike felt calmer, saner than he had in ages. He felt almost at peace. And that made no sense at all.

## **Part Twelve**

When Xander woke up sometime around noon, bladder complaining, he half-expected to find Spike gone—so he wasn't surprised to discover that he had the bed to himself. But when he went to stand and ended up stepping on an unhappy vampire, *that* was unexpected.

“Watch it!” Spike snarled, curling back into a ball. He'd stolen one of the blankets off the bed and had wrapped it around himself.

Xander regained his footing with some difficulty. “What the hell are you doing on the floor?”

“Bed's too soft,” Spike mumbled.

Xander ran a hand through his hair and stumbled to the

bathroom. He supposed if someone was used to sleeping on the floor, or on that cot Spike had back in his cell, a mattress might not be very comfortable. But that didn't explain why Spike had chosen the part of the floor that was closest to Xander. The room wasn't all that big, but there were other places he could have stretched out.

Deciding to chalk it up to more craziness, Xander stepped into the shower. He hadn't remembered to bring toiletries and the motel-provided shampoo smelled awful, but he supposed he was cleaner when he got out than when he went in. He couldn't shave either, and had to finger-comb his hair. Great. Now he was going to look more disreputable than the lunatic vampire.

When he emerged into the main room, Spike was still on the floor, but had tugged Xander's pillow down with him. Weird.

"I'm going out," Xander said as he got dressed. "The weather forecast for vamps is extra crispy, so I'd recommend you stay put. There's some blood left. I'll be back soon."

Spike grunted a reply of sorts.

As it turned out, the local shopping options were limited. Xander walked across gravel and then cracked pavement, squinting his one eye under the harsh sun. He was already sweaty by the time he entered the gas station market. At least it was on the large side, as gas station markets went. He filled a plastic basket with soap, shampoo, and shaving supplies, threw in a comb and toothbrush and toothpaste, and then cruised the food aisles for something resembling nutrition. He ended up with a box of strawberry Pop-Tarts—low fat!—a big bag of chips, some bread and mayo and sliced ham. He added a carton of OJ to the almost full basket, and a bottle of Mountain Dew. And when he passed a display of socks and t-shirts and tighty whities, he bought a three-pack of the shirts for Spike. White, not black, but they'd fit better than Xander's stuff. And, Xander thought, at least then Spike would own *something*. Why that mattered to him he couldn't say.

The big guy behind the counter took Xander's money, handed over the change, and said something that might have been thank you. Then Xander was back out in the heat and glare.

It was a very long afternoon. Spike slept. Xander ate and drank and watched crap on TV. He felt restless. It wasn't

often he sat around with nothing to do. Back at the Cove he had a never-ending list of projects, and he preferred it that way. Keeping busy meant he didn't have the chance to dwell on things, like lost friends or loneliness or a general sense of...

"Ennui," Spike piped up from his nest on the floor.

Xander frowned down at him. "Huh?"

"Ennui. A deep sense of lassitude or depression. You're the very picture of it."

Xander looked down at his body, slumped bonelessly on the bed. His fingers were salty and greasy from the potato chips and his good eye had gone glassy. He couldn't have said what show he was watching just then, or what he'd been watching all afternoon. "This isn't the top of my vacation destinations," he said.

"So why are you here?" Spike sat up gracefully.

"Cause it's still too sunny to leave."

"But you could leave without me."

“That’d be a pretty half-assed rescue, wouldn’t it? Drag you out of LA and then abandon you in the middle of the desert.”

Spike blinked at him. “So where are you taking me then?”

“Florida. We live there now.”

“And what will you do with me there?”

Xander really hadn’t thought that far. In truth, his plan had consisted of two steps: 1. Retrieve vampire, and 2. Get the fuck out of LA. Maybe he should have considered Step 3, because bringing a crazy vamp to Slayer central maybe wasn’t such a great idea, even if the vamp was chipped. Even if nobody staked him, what would Spike do with himself there? There weren’t any demons in the vicinity to keep him occupied. There was nothing except Slayers and construction projects and the beach.

“You can have some time to, uh, recover,” Xander finally said. “Relax. Then it’s up to you. Or... I dunno. Maybe Giles or someone will have an idea.”

Spike looked as skeptical about that as Xander felt, but

didn't say anything. He stood and stretched and walked to the cooler, where he fished out a container of blood. "Can I have a hot bath?" he asked as he sipped.

"Be my guest. There's soap and stuff in that plastic bag if you want." Xander waved vaguely in the direction of his convenience shop purchases.

"Ta."

Soon the water was running. Xander tried very hard not to think about Spike in the tub, naked, because even crazy vampires didn't take baths with sweatpants on. His skin would be all pale, most of his wounds likely healed by now, and his soft cock would be nestled gently among floating curls—

Shit.

Spike came out from the bathroom in a cloud of steam, his damp hair all tumbled and Xander's sweats hanging low on his narrow hips. "Felt lovely," he said.

Xander wondered when Spike had last had the chance for a bath. "There's some shirts in that bag for you, if you want. Don't bitch—the selection sucked."

Spike didn't bitch. He just look surprised, and then tore the bag open and pulled one of the shirts over his head.

By then the sun was almost down, so Xander gathered up his belongings and ate another Pop-Tart. He paused when he saw the watch still sitting on the nightstand. "We probably shouldn't just leave that here." He picked it up and held it out. "Here. I hate wearing a watch."

Spike stared a long time before swallowing and taking the item from Xander's hand. He clasped it around his own wrist. "You're meant to use it to control me," he said.

"Well, as long as you're not gonna eat me, I'm good. I've never been much of a control freak, unlike certain friends of mine."

He wasn't sure, but he thought Spike almost managed a smile at that.

The night was too young to have chased away the heat, and crickets were chirping loudly. Xander tossed his stuff into the trunk and climbed into the driver's seat. But Spike paused. "The chains," he said.

It took a moment for Xander to figure out what he meant. “I don’t want ’em. So unless you do, let’s leave ’em. Give the maid a thrill, maybe.”

That time, Spike definitely did smile.

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They didn’t speak as Xander drove. Spike took it upon himself to fiddle with the radio, finding new unobjectionable stations as the old ones faded out. Xander drove as quickly as possible, stopping only briefly for bathrooms, fast food, gas, and a stretch.

Even with the radio, the drive became monotonous and he had to fight to stay awake. There was nothing to see ahead of him but freeway and blackness, punctuated every now and then by headlights or some little nowhere town. “Do we have enough blood to last ’til Florida?” he asked after hours of silence.

“Yeah. Don’t need much.”

“Kay.”

More miles passed, and all Spike could find on the radio was static and religion. He finally clicked it off and then, much to Xander's surprise, began reciting something. Xander didn't understand much of what he was saying, but Spike had a really nice voice, and listening to him sure beat some guy ranting about going to hell.

*"I have't. It is engender'd. Hell and night*

*Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light,"* said Spike after a lot of other words, then paused. "End of Act One."

"Act One of what?"

Spike snorted. "Othello, of course."

"Oh. Um, Shakespeare, right?" When Spike answered only with another snort, Xander asked, "How'd you memorize all that?"

"Give yourself a century or two and I'll wager even you'd manage to memorize a thing or two as well."

Xander wasn't sure whether that was supposed to be an

insult. He kind of hoped it was, because that would mean a bit of the old Spike was back. And for some reason that was a good thing.

“Spike?”

“Hmm?”

“Why the hell did you go to Angel?” Xander hadn’t really intended to ask the question, and the ominous silence he received in response told him it had probably been a bad idea to open his mouth. But when had that ever stopped him? “I don’t know what things were like for you two way back when, but you haven’t exactly been best buds for a while. You helped us stop him that time, right? I bet he was pissed over that. And I heard about the thing with the magic ring and the hot pokers. Which, well, been tempted to torture him myself, more than once, but I never actually went through with it. But you did, and then there was... the thing with Buffy. Which you had to know he’d hear about, right? But still you went to him. Why?”

He didn’t think Spike was going to answer, especially not when the silence stretched on for several miles. But then Spike sighed, really quietly, like a breeze through

treetops. “He’s the only one who could know what it’s like.”

“Know what what’s like?”

“But he doesn’t really, does he?” Spike said, not really answering Xander's question. “He didn’t fight for it, didn’t *bleed* for it. For him ’t’s a burden, not a prize. And he’s still an enormous wanker anyway. Never could see the obvious in front of his big nose.”

Spike turned to stare out his window, leaving Xander confused. He was used to not understanding what people said—happened all the time with Willow and Giles—and lately Spike was making even less sense than usual. Except there *was* meaning in there, if Xander could only figure it out. It was like those puzzles on the back of cereal boxes when he was a kid, where you had to figure out that the little green star was an e and the yellow moon was an s, and then suddenly the message made sense.

“Holy fuck!” Xander yelled, and skidded the car onto the shoulder in a screech of rubber. “Holy fucking shit!”

Spike turned to stare at him like Xander was the crazy

one.

“A soul! You got a soul!” Xander’s voice was two octaves higher than normal.

Spike nodded. “Slightly used, a bit worse for the wear. Came dear anyhow.”

“But... but... but....” Xander stopped sputtering like a motorboat and tried to organize his thoughts. “Why? And how? And... shit, why was Angel still doing that to you?”

“The why made sense at the time—didn’t want to hurt the girl anymore.”

“Buffy,” Xander said with dawning realization. “You did it for Buffy.”

“Yeah.”

When Spike didn’t seem inclined to say more, Xander frowned. “Then why didn’t you come back to her?”

The road was dark and Spike was only dimly lit by the dashboard controls. But Xander could see the intensity in

his eyes, the... agony, maybe. “She only tolerated me for a bit because she was broken herself. I didn’t see that at the time. But she mended—strong girl, yeah?—and she’d never have me again. The soul is like a pair of spectacles. Helps me see certain things more clearly.”

Xander was no relationship expert. Obviously. Back when he’d first learned Buffy had been sleeping with Spike he was appalled and couldn’t understand why she would do that. But what Spike was saying now made sense, and Xander nodded.

“Okay. But then why Angel? I mean, yeah, he’s soulvamp too, but he’s still an asshole. Why didn’t you just take off on your own? You could’ve found a way to get by, even with the chip. You’re a smart guy.”

Spike looked momentarily surprised at the compliment, then shook his head. “It’s the spark, you see.” He thumped the center of his chest. “Burns. And the voices—God. You’ve no idea. Every person I’ve ever hurt, all come back at once to remind me what I am.”

Xander was a little unclear on what a soul actually did, how it made a difference. He knew lots of people did really terrible things despite having one, and occasionally

vampires did sort of good things even when they didn't have one. He supposed it was something like a conscience, like that little Jiminy Cricket voice inside your head. Only for the past two years, Xander's conscience had sounded a lot more like Anya than a Disney bug—and that was pretty weird, especially since Anya's own system of morals was... unique. So how would it be if you didn't have a voice at all, and then you spent a century or two doing lots and lots of really horrible things, and then suddenly your conscience bounced back?

Okay, the insanity made sense.

“Does Angel know you have a soul?” he asked.

Spike snorted. “Of course. Smelled it on me at once.”

“Then why was he treating you that way?”

“Cause it's more fun than torturing himself, innit? And he's an asshole, soul or not.”

“Well, it's not right. Not even if it kept him from flipping out over at the law firm.”

Spike gave him an odd look. “Since when does right have

anything to do with it?”

“If the good guys are as nasty as the bad guys, what’s the point of fighting?”

Maybe Spike didn’t know the answer to that. He turned to look out the window again. “Sun’s rising soon.”

“Yeah. Okay,” said Xander, and pulled back onto the freeway.

### **Part Thirteen**

Xander was snoring again, one dark-haired leg sticking out from under the covers. This motel was very much like the last, only here there was just one ugly painting and it was a pastoral landscape instead of seascape. Spike sat on the floor, back against a wall and knees drawn to his chest, staring at the boy.

It had felt oddly nice to talk about the soul, and the experience was even better when Xander didn’t tell him he was stupid for going through those trials, didn’t say he was shite even with the soul. Xander had even looked at him with something like respect and had

been indignant over Angel's actions.

Spike had never thought to find empathy in Xander Harris.

He wondered whether the potential had always been there, if only the two of them had been capable of seeing past their prejudices. Or perhaps they'd both simply grown up.

## **Part Fourteen**

Spike had been reciting Shakespeare for the past few hundred miles, which was a lot more interesting than Xander would have guessed. Kept him awake as he drove anyway, distracting him from the endless dark miles, the ache in his back, the bug splatters on the windshield, the heavy weight of humidity that crept into the car despite the AC. Xander never would have expected that Spike would make a pretty decent travel companion.

They arrived in Smuggler's Cove in the very wee hours, when even Slayers were tucked into bed. Xander parked as close to his own bungalow as he could get. Someone else could deal with returning the rental car in the morning. That someone could also clean out the wrappers, napkins, empty cups, and paper bags that littered the Chevy. Xander climbed out and gathered his stuff from the trunk, but Spike remained in the passenger seat, unmoving.

"You can get out now," Xander told him mildly.

"T's the end of the line," replied Spike. He looked scared.

"It's... a vacation, okay? You can rest a while. Until you decide what you want to do next."

Spike looked up at him with big eyes. "And if I can't decide?"

"There's worse places than here to hang out."

Spike followed him down the sandy path, pausing at the door for Xander to invite him in. For once, Xander had no misgivings about doing so. "Mi casa," he said

when he flicked on the lights. George squeaked at him from the ceiling.

“S nice,” said Spike.

“Yeah. It kind of is.” Xander looked around with fresh eyes. He’d salvaged this little house when it was hardly better than scrap. It wasn’t the type of place that was going to grace magazine covers, but it was shipshape and comfy.

Xander cleared his throat. “We’ll rustle you up some fresh blood in the morning. Meantime, I’ve got only the one bed, but the couch isn’t bad. And there’s lots of floor.” He toed at the whitewashed planks.

“Ta,” said Spike, but he still looked uncertain.

After a moment, Xander left him standing in the middle of the living room. He dumped his stuff in the bedroom and made a quick visit to the bathroom. Then he stripped and climbed into his very own bed, which had never ever felt so good.

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Xander and Spike fell into a strangely domestic routine over the next couple of weeks. While Xander spent the day fixing whatever seemed in danger of falling down next, Spike slept in the nest of blankets he'd built on the floor next to Xander's bed. And at night while Xander snoozed, Spike walked up and down the beach—tracking sand into the bungalow when he returned—or read the books he talked Xander into ordering for him online. For a few hours each evening they were both awake and not otherwise occupied, and then they'd sit on Xander's tropical couch and argue over what to watch on TV.

Spike seemed relaxed most of the time and pretty sane. And for the first time in, well, ever, Xander felt like he was *home*. It was kind of strange, really, what a difference another person made, even if that person was a vampire. Spike left wet towels on the floor and blood-stained mugs on the coffee table, but he was someone to talk to and joke with, someone to sit with and make fun of B movies, someone to hold a shelf steady while Xander attached it to the wall. He was, Xander was startled to realize one day, a friend.

And as if all that wasn't Twilight Zone enough, Spike

gave every indication of enjoying Xander's company as well and wanting to be near him.

Every couple of days the entire gang met in the clubhouse to go over current problems and plans. Xander persuaded Spike to attend these sessions in the hope that Spike's presence would help ease the Slayers' discomfort. The first time Spike showed up, every girl in the room reached for her stake and Xander had to stand in front of the vampire, but eventually things calmed down. Now Spike would sit next to Xander in the back row, slouching in his chair, looking almost relaxed. Most of the gang ignored him, although Willow sometimes smiled at him and Buffy occasionally shot him anxious looks.

A month or so after Spike's arrival in the Cove, there was a meeting to discuss whether to fix their swimming pool—which hadn't been used in years and seemed to be evolving new life forms—and to decide what to do about the growing threat of a hive of Tfezni demons in Kentucky, and to debate the pros and cons of investing in new axes and crossbows. Xander didn't contribute much to the meeting, aside from an observation that the ocean was fine if you wanted to swim and he was not going to add pool maintenance to his infinite list of

chores. Mostly he sat in the back row, watching Spike stare at the floor.

But then one of the newer Slayers asked about their relationship with the authorities, which sent Giles into a lengthy description of their agreements—sometimes explicit, sometimes tacit—with various law enforcement agencies. Including, at times, the military. And that made Xander start to think, which was a dangerous thing.

When the meeting was over and people started to clear out, Xander grabbed Spike's arm before he could leave. "Giles? Buff? Will? Can you hang on for a sec? I have a question for you." Spike looked alarmed.

Xander waited until the room was empty of everyone except the five of them, then dragged Spike to the front, where his old friends were seated behind a card table. In the past, they'd offered to give him a chair up front too, but he'd said no. He was satisfied to remain part of the crowd.

"What's up?" asked Buffy, giving Spike another of her worried frowns.

“You, uh, you could call in a favor from the army guys if you wanted to, right? After that thing we helped them with a few months ago.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Xander nodded. “Good. ’Cause I want you to have them take out Spike’s chip.”

He wasn’t sure who among his audience was the most shocked at his statement, but Spike was certainly a contender. He stared at Xander open-mouthed.

It was Willow who finally spoke, a little slowly, as if Xander was a young child. “Xan, if the chip’s gone he can go back to killing people.”

“I don’t think he will,” Xander said, crossing his arms on his chest.

Buffy took a step forward and put her hand on his shoulder. “Xander, I know he’s your roomie and all and he seems pretty harmless nowadays, but he’s a vampire. You can never forget that.”

Xander stepped away from her and closer to Spike,

who was trying—not very successfully—to mask his hurt with a sneer. “I know he’s a vamp,” Xander replied. “I have the bloodstains on my kitchen counter to prove it. But Angel’s a vamp too and you guys insisted that we could trust him.”

“But Angel has a soul,” Giles said.

Xander looked at Spike. Spike worked his jaw for a moment and then gave Xander a nod so small it would have been easy to miss. Xander turned back to his friends and said nothing—he just raised his eyebrows and waited.

Willow got it first. “Goddess!” she cried, then clapped her hand over her mouth. Giles’ eyes widened when he figured it out, and then Buffy went very pale.

“When?” Buffy demanded.

“Just after... after Sunnydale,” answered Xander.

Willow looked stricken. “So when Angel was... was doing those things to him—”

“Yeah.” And then, because he couldn’t help himself,

Xander added, "Spike didn't get cursed. He fought for his soul because he wanted to be a better man."

Everyone stared at Spike, who said nothing. In fact, he had his eyes focused on Xander and a really strange look on his face, which Xander couldn't interpret.

"Good Lord," Giles muttered. He looked very much like he wished he had something to drink just then. Xander kind of wished the same.

"Look," Xander said. "You went and fought a whole big dragon-infested battle because Angel asked you to. I'm asking for a whole lot less here. Get that fucking thing out of Spike's brain and try to treat him like a real person for once. Someone with feelings."

Buffy winced a little, although Xander's accusation wasn't aimed only at her. Really, he'd done a pretty good job himself of treating Spike like a thing. And yeah, okay, maybe Spike *did* try to kill him once or twice, but that didn't mean Xander had earned the right to pick on him when he was freshly chipped and really down on his luck.

After a long silence, Buffy said, "I'll call Riley."

Probably Giles, Willow, and Buffy had some discussing to do. Like deciding how to react to the knowledge that Angel had tortured and raped a guy with a soul. But Xander didn't want to stick around and listen, so he nodded his thanks and turned to leave the clubhouse. Spike was right beside him as they headed out into the sticky, no-see-um-infested night.

For no reason he could name, Xander felt giddy and bouncy, his heart as light as a helium-filled balloon. He shoved Spike's shoulder and grinned. "How about a night swim? Race you to the beach."

Spike smiled, shoved him back—gently—and began to run.

## **Part Fifteen**

The mouse cowered in the corner of the room, shoulders hunched, watching—

No.

Sod that.

The *man* sat and watched as Xander mumbled in his sleep. Xander's hair was still damp, and although there were the odors of shampoo and soap, he still smelled of the sea. Spike had enjoyed watching him frolic in the waves: tanned skin, strong arms and legs, movements graceful and sure. The boy was a brilliant swimmer as well, for once outdistancing and outmaneuvering Spike with ease, but always turning back to splash water playfully in Spike's direction before laughing and diving like a seal.

They'd swum until Spike's muscles ached and his eyelashes were crusted with salt, then, pausing only to pull their trousers on, had run back to the cozy little bungalow. They'd taken turns in the shower and downed two beers apiece, and then Xander had climbed into bed.

Spike had meant to head back outside then, perhaps for another of his aimless rambles, but found himself loath to open the door. Not out of fear for once, and not because of the bloody voices, which had been

silent since that evening's meeting. He didn't want to leave because... because he wanted to stay with Xander.

Bloody hell.

For a time, Spike attempted to watch the telly. But he couldn't focus on any of the programs, not when the scene after the meeting kept replaying in his head, not when Xander's strong body kept flashing before his eyes.

His chest felt tight and his fingers tingled, and it wasn't until the sun began to rise —behind the heavy shutters Xander had installed for him—that Spike realized what he was feeling. Happy. He had a soul and a home, the chip was going to come out, and Xander trusted him. Respected him, even.

Spike was bleeding *happy*.

He didn't bother to turn off the telly. He tore off his clothing as he hurried through the house, only his demonic grace keeping him from tripping and falling on his arse. And then he stood in Xander's bedroom, looking down at the sleeping man.

Spike climbed into bed beside him and pulled Xander close.

Xander's eyes flew open. "Wha—?"

"I'm not offering myself because I have to," Spike told him earnestly. "Not anymore. It's because I want to. I want *you*. Now, and until your heart beats its last."

Xander breathed in and out for a full minute, his gaze never leaving Spike's face. And Spike saw the shared feeling before Xander spoke it aloud, saw the spark that lit in Xander's one good eye. The twin to the spark that had just roared to life in Spike's chest. No longer painful, the fire inside him was now warm and welcome: newfound life for his cold, dead heart.

**The End**