

# Shame the Devil

by  
Yin Again

## Part One

Xander Harris thumbed through the neatly sorted stacks of mail that were precisely arranged on his borrowed desk. The desk itself was in a cramped office that was nestled deep in the bowels of the God-knows-who Memorial Coliseum, Arena or Civic Center in Atlanta, Kansas City or possibly Memphis, but he just wasn't sure. Each stack of mail had a yellow sticky note on top of it and they were labeled in Anna's precise handwriting. Not surprisingly, the smallest stack was marked "personal". It consisted of a single thick, heavy, cream-colored envelope - the kind that invitations and announcements came in. Xander was about to open it when he heard a tentative knock at the door.

"Come in, CJ," he said, and cursed under his breath. He hated doing this, and he hated the reason he had to do it. CJ, a tall, thin guy with glasses, entered the room and perched uneasily on the folding chair set up in front of the desk. He would not raise his head to meet Xander's

sharp-eyed gaze, instead looking nervously around the room and smoothing wisps of his sandy hair where they had escaped from a scraggly ponytail.

"Fuck, CJ - why are you doing this to me?" Xander asked, running his hands through his own shaggy, dark hair. "You know better than this. You fucking know I have to fire you. It's Rule #4 - the Springer Caveat."

CJ slumped in his chair. "I know, man. He's just so ..." his voice trailed off miserably.

"Yes, CJ - I know. That's why when I hire you guys, I make it a point to specifically ask you if you can hold out against him - you said you could." Xander's voice softened. "I know he can be terribly convincing - it's his nature. I understand." Xander sighed. "However, that doesn't erase the image that's burned on my retinas of having to pry Spike off of that woman and her sixteen year old daughter. And then she bitched me out about it! You know the rule - no mother-daughter teams. Christ, CJ - not only is it annoying, disturbing and illegal; it's the second time this week!" CJ merely hung his head.

"Get your severance from Anna - your confidentiality waiver is still in effect," Xander said as he stood and held a hand out to the younger man. "I'm sorry, man." CJ took Xander's hand and shook it, then left with a resigned sigh.

Xander echoed the sigh and rested his head in his hands. He was contemplating the envelope again when he heard his name being frantically shouted from down the hall. Fuck, what now, he thought as he raced out the door.

Isha, one of the bodyguards, was standing outside another anonymous door thirty feet down the corridor, gesturing for Xander to hurry. Xander rounded the corner at a dead run, and Isha snagged his arm to slow his momentum and push him toward the door. Bursting into the dressing room, Xander swept his eyes around to assess the situation. Another beefy bodyguard, Ace, was standing in the middle of the room. Spike's much smaller body was wrapped around the larger man in a parody of an embrace.

At first sight, it looked like Ace had Spike in a headlock, but Xander knew better. Spike's head was cradled in the crook of the bodyguard's arm, but it was not restrained there - the vampire had his fangs buried in the soft flesh of the inside of the large man's elbow and was feeding. Ace was pale and struggling, his eyes were beginning to look panicked.

Xander tried not to notice that Spike was lost in the ecstasy of the blood, his eyes rolled back in his head, his tongue working against the flesh in his mouth, his hips pumping his erection against the body in his arms. Ace was trying to pry the

vampire's mouth away from him, but Spike easily held the man in place as if he didn't weigh well over 300 pounds and have biceps as big as Spike's thighs.

Stepping up to the entwined men, Xander reached forward and twisted his right hand into the vampire's blond curls. He tightened his hand viciously, ignoring the angry growl that emanated from Spike.

"Let go, fucker," Xander hissed, being careful not to give in to the urge to shake Spike's head until his teeth rattled, so he wouldn't hurt Ace further. "You're draining Ace, you dick." Spike's eyes flew open and he stopped feeding. After a long moment, he carefully eased his fangs out of the larger man's flesh. He tried to push the bodyguard's arm away. Seeing that Ace was free, Xander gave in to the impulse and shook Spike's head sharply by the hair several times.

"Lick it. You aren't leaving him with a scar just because you can't control yourself," he said, and Spike did as he was told, laving the puncture wounds on Ace's arm until they closed. Xander and Isha ignored the small moan that Ace couldn't suppress. Xander kept his hold on Spike's hair, not allowing the vampire to raise his head. With his other hand, he gave Ace a gentle push toward the other bodyguard.

"Get him out of here, Isha. Take him to Julie for a shot, get him a steak, and reshuffle the roster so he gets a couple of days off." Xander sighed; giving both men what he hoped was a smile that was equal parts apology and reassurance. As soon as the door clicked shut behind them, Xander pulled Spike upright and looked into his face.

The demon visage had receded, but the blue eyes were spacey. Xander looked at the vampire's pupils and cursed again. "CJ?" he asked. Spike nodded. "Well, I already fired him, so that's that. How much?"

"Nine." Spike's voice was low. Xander cursed again, and let go of Spike's hair. The vampire stumbled slightly, and Xander automatically reached out to steady him. Spike sidestepped and moved in, pressing his body against Xander's side. He rubbed his crotch against the human's hip.

"Xanderrrrr," Spike growled. Xander knew that a blood-lusting, horny Spike with nine thousand dollars worth of heroin in his non-streaming bloodstream wasn't likely to listen to reason, so he merely wrapped his arm around the narrow waist and tilted his head back as he shoved one of his thighs between the insane vampire's legs. Spike clamped his own thighs against Xander's, wrapped his arms around him and started

thrusting. His lips came to rest against Xander's throat, and he eagerly mouthed the warm flesh, taking care not to touch the human with his teeth.

Spike muttered and moaned against Xander's neck as his pace sped up, and if the human heard his own name in those growls and groans, he didn't dwell on it. The vampire climaxed with a shudder and a sigh, and hung limply off of Xander's larger frame for a moment. As soon as Xander felt dampness soaking into his jeans, he unwound their bodies and half-walked, half-carried Spike to the attached bathroom.

He shoved the still-unsteady form into the shower and turned the cold water on full blast. He ignored the indignant curses and howls that rang through the small room, but did relent and reach in to turn the hot water on. He waited for ten minutes; studiously ignoring his hard on until it finally gave up and subsided, then peeked into the shower. Spike was on his feet, washing listlessly, his clothes scattered on the tile. He turned his head and gave Xander a sheepish smile. His eyes were less spacey and he was regaining some of his characteristic grace. Xander withdrew.

The shower turned off, and Spike pulled back the curtain, sluicing water off of his hair with his other hand. He stepped out of the shower and

shrugged gratefully into the thick terry robe Xander handed him. The human draped a towel across Spike's shoulders and took his arm, leading him back out into the main dressing room and over to a large, plush sofa that was covered in an electric blanket. Spike sank down onto its warmth and started blotting his dripping hair with the towel. Xander sat beside him and pulled another blanket off the arm of the sofa, wrapping it around Spike.

"Sorry," Spike muttered, not looking up.

"Sorry for what? Ace? I know you aren't sorry about the mom and daughter team - either one of them, or the smack," Xander replied in an even voice.

"Yeah, Ace. Didn't mean to - I just got caught up. Is he mad?"

"I don't know, Spike. Probably not - Ace is pretty mellow. You're lucky it wasn't Jack - he would have probably punched you." Spike could hear Xander's smile, but still didn't look up.

"M sorry about the other, too." The vampire's voice was still low.

"What? Humping me?" Xander laughed. "You are so not sorry - you just wanted to get off. I could have been anyone. Now, stop pouting. You know it doesn't work on me. You have to be onstage in two hours. Wanna sleep a little?"

"Will you stay?" Xander sighed yet again at the tone in Spike's voice. It was that tone he used every now and again; the one that made Xander almost believe there was a shred of actual emotion in the vampire's unbeating heart. The tone that sounded lonely. Biting back another sigh, Xander raised his arm, allowing Spike to fold himself to his side. He propped his chin on top of the wet curls and let himself relax. A fleeting thought - the word "envelope" - flitted across Xander's mind, but he didn't bother to chase it. Within minutes, they were both asleep. They stayed that way until the hairdresser, makeup artist and stylist arrived an hour later to work on Spike before the show.

## **Part Two**

"No. No, no, fucking no."

"Yes, you twat - we're going."

"What part of 'fucking no' do you not understand, Spike? I'm. Not. Going. You're a grown up vampire - you want to go, go. I'm not." Spike crossed the room and laid a hand on Xander's

shoulder. As soon as stormy brown eyes met his own, he smiled gently.

"We need to go, Xan. It's for Dawn. Little Bit will never understand if we miss her graduation, and you need to face them - you need to face Buffy and hash it all out once and for all." Spike's smile twisted into a smirk as he continued, "besides - if I go, you have to go. I'm completely co-dependent and couldn't find my ass with both hands without you. At least, that's what you tell everybody."

Xander batted the vampire's hand off of his shoulder and sat down heavily into another anonymous desk chair in another anonymous office in another anonymous venue. He dropped his dark head into his hands and sighed.

"I don't want to do this, Spike," Xander said. "I don't want to go back to Sunnydale with my tail between my legs and crawl to Buffy's feet to beg forgiveness for being an asshole. On my list of top ten things I don't want to do, this ranks pretty damn high."

"She forgave you a long time ago, you stupid git," Spike said. He leaned against the desk and propped one of his booted feet on the corner of Xander's chair.

Xander straightened in his seat and lifted his head to eye Spike suspiciously. "How do you know that? When did you talk to her?" he said.

The vampire rolled his eyes. "Uh - once a month for the last eight years? I am paying for her sister's education." Spike enunciated each word carefully, as if Xander were very drunk.

"When did she tell you what I did?" Xander's voice was much less forceful than before, and Spike hated the shame he heard there.

"She didn't," he answered.

"Then how do you know she's forgiven me?" The suspicious tone was back in Xander's voice.

Spike looked at the human for a moment, and then placed his hand on the slumped shoulder again. "I asked her what was between the two of you. She said that you both did and said some things you didn't mean and that she'd forgiven you and hoped you'd forgive her and yourself."

"She didn't do anything wrong," Xander's eyes dropped from Spike's and back to the floor.

"She says she did," Spike said softly.

"No," Xander said miserably, "It was me."

Spike awkwardly patted his friend's shoulder. "What did you do, pet? You can tell me - not big on judging, you know."

Xander raised his head to meet Spike's eyes, and the vampire saw a dangerous glint there. When Xander spoke again, his tone was harsh, and his eyes glittered. "You want to know what I did, Spike? Well, just remember that you asked, OK?" Xander took a deep breath and leaned forward. Neither man noticed that Spike's hand slipped a little to curve toward the back of Xander's neck. "I helped drag her out of Heaven - but you knew about that. And you made your feelings pretty clear - with the yelling and the leaving." Spike's mouth opened and Xander made a quelling gesture.

"Shut up - you wanted to hear this and I'm only saying it once. So, dragged out of Heaven because her friends were stupid - that was major. But, then it got better. You were gone, and she was a mess - she couldn't deal with anything, couldn't feel, she said. And then, I got my wish. Buffy finally turned to me for comfort. I finally had the girl of my dreams in my arms, begging me to love her."

Xander laughed bitterly. "I was still in shock after Anya died, you'd gone, Willow and Tara were miserable, Dawn was terrified, and Buffy - God, Buffy wanted to fuck me. She wanted me to make her feel...to make her feel anything. For a while it was enough just to fuck. All the time, anywhere, any way - whatever she wanted. She nearly killed me, Spike. I could barely keep up

with her. And then I couldn't. And then fucking wasn't enough. There had to be screaming and yelling and arguing."

Spike wanted to stop the recitation - the look in Xander's eyes was scaring the hell out of him; the restrained violence in the other man's voice was arousing his demon as much as it was unnerving the human part of him. Xander paused and took a breath, then kept speaking in a low, vicious voice. "Then, one day, screaming and yelling wasn't enough - she pushed me. I pushed her back. She made some smartass remark, and I - I hit her."

In an instant, Spike's hand moved from the back of Xander's neck to gather a fistful of the front of the human's shirt as he jerked them both to their feet. His eyes glowed a baleful yellow as he stared into Xander's face. A small part of his brain noted that Xander wasn't exhibiting any signs of fear, simply returning the venomous look with one of rage and shame.

"You. Did. What?" Spike gritted out.

Xander calmly removed the vampire's hand from his shirt and stepped back. "Don't make me rethink my decision to stop carrying a stake, Spike." They both settled back into their original positions, Xander in the chair, Spike leaning against the desk with his hands clasped on his knee hard enough to make the small bones creak

"To answer your question," Xander said, "I hit her. I hit Buffy in anger. Then I left. Six months later, I met up with you again."

"Did you hurt her?"

"No. I don't think it actually even registered for her at the time," Xander's tone betrayed the disgust he still felt for his actions.

Spike felt all of his righteous anger leave him in a flood. "What did it do for you?" he asked.

Xander laughed bitterly and wiped a hand across his mouth, as if he could wipe away the taste of his shame. "Made me sick. Made me want to die. Proved to me that, if nothing else, I am my father's son." The bitter laugh again. "It scared the shit out of me, Spike. It made me leave every person I ever loved, because, not only was I useless at protecting them from vamps and demons, I couldn't even protect them from monsters like me."

They stared at each other for a long moment, and Xander noticed that Spike's eyes had changed back to blue. "Your Dad hit your Mum?" the vampire asked softly.

"Yeah."

"And you?"

"Yeah."

"How long?"

"Forever. Doesn't matter."

Spike reached out one more time and laid a hand on Xander's shoulder. "It does matter, pet. It matters to me. You want me to kill him?"

"I already offered," Xander said, "she wouldn't let me."

Spike snorted. "And people say demons are fucked up."

Xander sat very still, drawing a tiny amount of comfort from the cool hand on his shoulder and the easy camaraderie that seemed to surface between them at the oddest moments.

"I still don't know why she'd ever forgive me," Xander said.

"It's what she does. She's the forgiving sort," Spike replied, squeezing the shoulder under his hand, and then releasing it with some reluctance.

"I don't deserve it," Xander sighed.

"Xan?" Spike said.

"Yeah?"

"Get off the bloody cross, would you? Accept the forgiveness, give her yours and move the fuck

on." His smile was gentle. "Besides, you know broodiness gives me hives."

Xander smiled back. "Well, I wouldn't want to be responsible for marring your pretty skin."

"Damn right."

### **Part Three**

"I can't tell you how excited I am that you guys are coming!" Willow was so giddy that Xander had no idea how she was keeping the pitch of her voice out of dog-ears-only range. She and Xander had been on the phone for over five minutes - the longest they had talked in years. So far the conversation was mainly Willow squealing and Xander laughing. "OK, what's the plan?" she asked, and could sense that she had her "detail-oriented face" on.

"Two more shows in wherever the hell we are - Indiana, I think?" Xander realized that he truly didn't know, and reminded himself to look at the front of the phone book as soon as he got out of bed - the phone book always knew where it was. "Then we'll fly back to LA and drive to you, so we'll arrive Thursday night. Party's Saturday, right?"

"Yep. Do you want to stay with us?" she asked hopefully.

"Nah - we're set up at the Delta. I hope it's up to Spike's extremely prissy hotel standards. We have to bring the obligatory rock star entourage, and what with being mostly nocturnal it'll be easier on you if we just hotel it." Xander kept his tone light. He didn't want Willow to suspect that he had very specific reasons for not wanting to put himself and Spike into close quarters with the others.

"How many in the entourage? I'll need to tell the caterer for the party," Willow said, and Xander could hear a pen scratching on paper.

"Just the two of us and the four bodyguards - skeleton crew," he joked.

She snorted. "Spike needs four bodyguards? His body's not that big. Oh! Does he need a source for blood?"

Xander didn't speak for a moment, and then replied carefully, "We'll bring what we need, but thanks. The guards are two shifts, just in case. He tends to get mobbed."

"Yeah, I get that - that photo on the cover of his latest CD is drool-worthy in a big way. Gah!" Xander could hear her blush.

Xander's thoughts raced back to the photo shoot for the album cover in question. The photographer had been a prancing sissy who drove Spike absolutely insane, and the vampire had very nearly stormed out of the studio several times. Finally, Xander had made everyone leave the room. He had sat Spike down in the center of the floor and made him laugh until he nearly cried by doing imitations of Angel in the old days. After Xander had improvised a three minute riff called "the Magnificent Poof and the Case of the Missing Hair Gel" that had left Spike lying weakly on the floor in near-hysterics, he had allowed the photo crew back in, with the caveat that none of them speak. They'd gotten some good photos of a much more relaxed Spike.

The photo that had eventually become the album cover was the last one that had been shot. The photographer had gestured that they were finished, and Xander had jokingly blown a kiss at Spike, to thank him for cooperating. Out of the blue, a bolt of - something - something hot and coiled and electric - had shot between the two men. The photographer had snapped one last digital frame that captured Spike crouched down on the floor in front of a blood-red backdrop, wearing all black. His hands were dangling down between his spread knees, his head was tilted, and he wore a look that was direct, primal, appraising and raw - part predator, part seducer. It was an image that graced a million teenagers'

walls, and the fantasies of many of their parents. Xander felt parts of him responding to the memory of being the object of that look. At the time, the photographer had started shrieking about what a great shot it was, and Xander had been forced to move quickly to keep Spike from killing the shrill little man, totally wrecking the mood.

"Hello? Xander?" The tone of Willow's voice told him this was not the first time she'd called his name.

"Sorry. Got distracted. What?" he babbled.

"I said, tell Spike he has to make a speech at the party - the other girls' parents are doing it, and Buffy and Spike are pretty much Dawnie's honorary Mom and Dad."

"What about Giles? That seems like a Giles thing," Xander said, thinking about how loud Spike was going to yell when told he had to make a speech.

"Giles is..." She hesitated. "Giles is kind of...not himself right now."

"What does that mean, Willow?" Xander asked, and she was suddenly glad that she couldn't see his face, wondering if it was half as fierce as his voice right then.

"He's recovering from what we think is a magical backlash - he cast a spell that backfired on him. He's a little...nuts. But, he's getting better." She sounded desperate.

"How long has he been nuts, Willow?"

"A couple of days. I've consulted some others in my coven - we're working on a fix. He'll be fine, I promise. Tara and I are taking good care of him - and he's going to be just fine." Her fervent tone told him that she was reassuring herself as much as him.

Xander decided to let the subject drop for the moment. "OK, you want me to call you when we get into town or wait 'til Sleeping Evil gets up on Friday?" he asked.

"You better call when you get in - Dawn will be bouncing all over the place." She hesitated.

"Xander, have you talked to Buffy?"

"No."

"Will you please call her? You guys really need to get all this stuff between you settled before you arrive," she said.

"OK," he sighed, "I'll call her tonight as soon as I get Spike safely on stage."

"Can I ask you something?" She sounded as if she were afraid that she might anger him, and

Xander felt his guts twist a little at the thought that she might fear his reaction.

"Anything," he replied.

"What's the deal with you and Spike, anyway?" She sounded genuinely curious, and he had to laugh a little.

"It's...complicated. And, yes, I know that's not much of an answer. Technically, I'm his business manager - I hire, I fire, I book the tours, I sign things. I yell at people who fuck up and give Porches to people who don't. Xander giveth and Xander taketh away," he joked. "I do all the stuff that Spike hates, and he goes out there and sings and dodges panties and makes millions of bucks."

"I know that," she replied, with an edge of impatience. "I meant personally."

"Personally?" His voice squeaked a little at the end of the word. "We're friends, I guess. Business partners. Why?"

"Oh," she said, and she sounded - disappointed? "I just thought maybe you were together. It's just that all the nice little cards and presents and things are always signed 'love, S+X', and he talks about you a lot when he calls and stuff."

Xander was momentarily speechless. Nice little cards? Presents? Spike calls Willow? Spike calls

Willow and talks about me? Xander-brain shutting down now...all unsaved work will be lost. Please press any key to continue.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Wills, but there's nothing romantic going on with me and the evil undead." Xander-brain failsafe engaged, sarcasm released. Crisis averted.

"Well, is there anybody else special? For either of you?" Willow sounded wistful.

"Depends on your definition of 'special', I guess," Xander replied ruefully. "Spike nails a lot of groupies. And roadies. And strippers and waitresses and God knows what else."

"Xander!" Willow sounded outraged.

"What? Hello - gorgeous, immortal, stud-muffin rock star. The guy gets laid a lot."

"Well, I guess that's not much of a surprise," she conceded. "But, nobody for you?"

"I get by." He smiled into the phone, hoping that the sentiment transferred down the wire. "Wills, we don't have a normal life, OK? I mean, neither of us has lived anywhere but hotels and vacation rentals for over five years. Neither of us owns a car. If we aren't recording or touring, we're raising hell in some beach town 'til it's time to record or tour again."

"It seems lonely," she said.

"It isn't. We have a great group of people. Take Annie - she's the brains of the operation. She's been with us for seven years. She makes sure we eat and bails us out of jail and makes us pay our taxes and stuff - she loves us. And the guys - the bodyguards - they've all been with us for at least two years. We have a strange little family, Willow, but it works for us."

"Tell me more, Xander - I want to know about your family." Her voice was so hopeful and sweet that Xander found himself falling back into the warm cushion of scoobiness that he'd left behind so long ago. He balled up a pillow and propped himself up comfortably.

Over the next hour he told her more about Annie and the four bodyguards - individually Ace, Jack, Isha and Carl; collectively "the guys". He related funny stories about Julie, their fitness trainer/nurse/ chef; Dave, the guitar technician who had been giving Xander lessons for six months; the members of the touring band; the sound and lighting engineers and the assorted assistants, administrators and hangers-on who populated their insular little world.

Xander explained to Willow how they kept Spike's vampiness a closely-held secret, with only the inner circle being privy to the knowledge. She was fascinated with his

descriptions of how they controlled his public appearances, photo shoots, interviews and other details. Throughout the conversation, Xander had been steadfastly ignoring the cell phone that was trying to vibrate off of the bed table. Finally, he knew he had to get back to the demands of his job.

"I'm sorry, Wills - but I've got to go. People are screaming for me." Xander was surprised to find that his reluctance to hang up was entirely genuine.

"OK - Mr. Famous Guy," she mock-whined. "But, I get lots and lots of your undivided attention when you're here, OK?" She was quiet for a moment, and then added, "I've missed you, Xander."

Speaking through the lump in his throat, Xander said, "I've missed you, too. I promise - lots of catching up time." He hung up the room phone and picked up the cell.

"What?" he snapped. He listened for a moment. "Call Annie - I'll be down in an hour. If she can't help you then it can wait a fuckin' hour." He clicked the tiny phone shut and turned over onto his back with a sigh.

Thoughts of the conversation with Willow turned to thoughts of the photo shoot where they'd taken the album cover shot she had mentioned,

and Xander felt his cock twitch and start to fill. He slipped a hand down his naked body and loosely circled himself with his fingers. He concentrated on the look that had been in Spike's eyes - the look that had pinned him on the spot with raw, electric, seething need, and he was instantly fully erect.

He squeezed his shaft and felt a small gush of fluid at the tip. He rubbed his thumb over the slit and used the pearly drops to lubricate the slide of his palm. It wasn't enough. Rolling onto his side, he reached into the drawer of the bedside table and pulled out a nearly empty tube of lubricant. It was a sad testament to the state of his love life that he'd only used it on himself. Shrugging off that thought, he squeezed some of the slick gel onto his fingers and began stroking himself in earnest.

Xander let his other hand trail down to roll and cup his balls, pulling lightly on the heavy, velvet sac and rolling it against his body. He let his thoughts drift to an incident that had happened on their last tour.

There was a certain point in each show where Spike left the stage. While the guitarists and the drummer each took a long solo, Spike was able to change clothes and get some blood, Jack Daniels, drugs (if Xander had been less than diligent in his pre-show sweep) and usually a

blowjob from a handy groupie before resuming the stage. On this particular night, Xander had walked into the backstage area just in time to see Spike, naked from the waist down and knee deep in girls, draining a fifth of JD. As the empty bottle had been flung aside, Xander's gaze locked on the girls at the vampire's feet. One was in front of him, deep-throating his cock. The second was crouched between his legs, sucking his balls. The third girl was kneeling behind Spike, with her tongue buried between the firm globes of his ass.

Spike had one hand buried in the hair of the girl blowing him, roughly fucking her mouth. The vampire's head was thrown back, eyes closed, and a steady stream of filthy language was pouring from his mouth. Out of the four of them, Spike was the only one to notice Xander, just as his eyes flew open preceding his orgasm. The vampire and mortal had locked eyes, and Spike's free hand had flailed out to grab one of Xander's, squeezing their linked fingers with punishing force as he came. The two men had stood unmoving until the girl on her knees in front of Spike had released his cock with a small "pop". Shaking himself, Xander had dropped Spike's hand, turned and left the room.

The memory of the fire in the depths of Spike's eyes at that moment of release brought Xander to the edge, and he stroked himself harder. It still wasn't enough. Stopping, he squeezed the

remainder of the lubricant onto his hands and rubbed them together. He returned his right hand to his straining erection, and raised one leg so he could bring the other hand down to circle the puckered entrance to his body. He slid a finger inside and gasped. He stretched himself and added another finger, hissing at the burning sensation.

He let his mind wander to the memory he saved for occasions like this - when the normal beat-off fantasies weren't enough; when it had been too long between lovers; when he had one of his infrequent, usually drug-fueled, semi-sexual encounters with Spike that confused the hell out of him. The memory of a night several years past, when he had stormed into Spike's bedroom to yell at him for some transgression - drugs, underage groupies, something - and found the vampire sprawled across his bed with a young man crouched between his legs.

At first, it had looked like a garden-variety blowjob. Xander wasn't shocked - Spike was just as likely to get one of those from a man as a woman, or even a non-human, depending on where his fancy took him on a particular night. But this was different. The man had straightened, Spike's heavy cock slipping from his mouth, and Xander had seen that his entire hand was pushed inside Spike. The word "fisting"

crossed Xander's mind - he knew what it was, but had never even seen photos.

Spike was on his back, with his knees bent and his feet flat on the bed. His hands were at his sides, curled tightly into the sheets. His hips were canted forward, and his back was tense. His eyes were open, awash in tears. Xander had never seen a look like the one on Spike's face - pain and pleasure and need and bare, open lust, all watered by the tears that streamed from huge, shining blue eyes. Those eyes had met Xander's as one of the vampire's hands had shot forward to grab the wrist lodged at the center of his body to keep the other man from withdrawing.

"Close," Spike had rasped, "So close, don't stop." At his plea, the young man had carefully rotated his hand and pushed it up into Spike. The motion had caused the vampire's back to bow further, and he came with a harsh cry, white spurts arcing into the air and landing in heavy drops on his pale chest and abdomen. The young man had repeated the rotating motion and slowly pulled his hand out. As the knuckles exited his body, Spike had cried out again, coming dry. As Spike panted harshly, Xander had closed the door.

On the bed, Xander twisted his fingers sharply and found his prostate. He rubbed it hard and tightened his hand around the swollen, reddened

head of his cock. One more rub, and his balls drew up; one more hard stroke and he shot all over the sheets. Xander wiped his hands on the bedclothes, caught his breath, then got up and walked unsteadily to the shower, ignoring the vibrating telephone on the table.

#### **Part Four**

Packing - concentrate on packing. Don't think about achy knuckles and how they got that way. Don't think about the all-over soreness that comes from fucking Buffy ten ways to Sunday for weeks on end. Put the clothes in the bag, folding is optional at this point. Don't feel the tears threatening, there's no time for that pansy shit now. Besides, monsters don't fucking cry - they don't have the right.

Clothes, shoes, toiletries - all in the bag. The little apartment is almost bare anyway - couldn't keep any of the stuff after she died. Every piece of furniture, every trinket and useless little bit of glass or wood or cloth had her all over it - smelled like her, felt like her, called her name. It had all gone like magic - hell, with Willow around it could have actually been magic.

Two days after the tower he'd signed the paperwork and stood by the bed as the machines were turned off and Anya's mechanical breathing had ceased. The next day they had put Buffy into the ground in the hidden little grove. They'd done it after dark, for discretion and out of respect for Spike. Xander had stood just inside the protective circle the witches had laid to keep them safe from demons and to keep the Slayer's grave private, and allowed the grievously injured and slowly healing vampire to lean heavily on him, ignoring the pain of his own bruises and stitches.

Tears had poured silently down both their faces as Giles had haltingly eulogized a girl who saved the world a lot. Willow, Tara and Dawn had formed a small knot of misery that seemed to collapse more upon itself every second. Giles and Xander had filled the grave themselves with the others sitting on the grass, silent in the moonlight, helping Willow light candles and burn herbs to protect Buffy's rest.

When the work was finished, they had piled into Xander and Giles' cars and carried the urn containing Anya's ashes to the beach, where the others had stood back and watched as Xander waded out knee-deep in the waves to gently sprinkle her remains into the void. He also dropped her engagement ring into the swirling, dark water. He'd stood, tide eddying about his

knees, until he felt a cool hand on his shoulder. Spike had stood next to Xander for a long moment, watching the moonlight play on the black surface, then led him haltingly back to the shore.

Their losses had bonded them over the summer. They'd found support in one another; patrolling, killing demons and vampires, and sitting quietly in Spike's crypt or Xander's new, Spartan, Anya-free apartment drinking and watching mindlessly violent movies. As the summer drew to a close, Xander made the decision to keep the plan for Buffy's resurrection from Spike. Once the ritual had been completed, Xander had taken the brunt of the vampire's anger, disappointment and fear, and then watched him walk away in tears, warning of the dire consequences of such dark magic.

Consequences. Well, weeks later, Xander finally understood about consequences. Wasn't it enough that his fiancée had died? That he'd had to bury one of his best friends? Wasn't it enough that his other best friend had been required to tap into forces better left alone to try and make it right? Was it worth the overwhelming joy of seeing Buffy again, alive and whole? Was that moment of joy worth the moments of agony he'd felt upon realizing that Spike had really left? When Buffy had told him in confidence that she had been ripped out of Heaven on their selfish

whim? That she was frozen and cold and still half-dead, aching to feel anything to make her know she was alive?

And if that wasn't enough, was there a word for the feeling that swept over him when Buffy, his fantasy, his crush, the girl of his dreams had turned to him and melted into his arms with a kiss equal parts hope and desperation? Was there a whole dictionary devoted to the study of the words for the feelings that threatened to burst out of him as he had finally, sweetly slipped inside her heat, burning himself on the wave of fire that swept through them?

What could be the consequences of having this woman fulfill every fantasy he'd ever had, tearing him apart and putting him back together with the furor and fierceness of her love? And, finally, he had learned the truth of it - that she was using him. Worse than that - in the end he wasn't enough for her. He had done everything he knew how to do, and even learned some new things - but it wasn't enough. Her overwhelming need for more, stronger, faster, harder, more violent emotions had pushed him too far.

Consequences. The consequences of loving Buffy all boiled down to a sore hand and the peculiar brand of self-loathing that was born in his heart when he realized that a small part of him had enjoyed hitting her. Amidst all the love and pain

and sorrow, there was the smallest twinge of satisfaction gleaned from the singular sound of knuckles meeting flesh in anger. That twinge was what had sent him reeling away in horror to run back to the small apartment and pack his few remaining belongings.

Xander shouldered the bag and walked out to his car. Running away never solved anything, they said. Fuck them.

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Comfy barstool, flowing booze and the band wasn't too loud behind his back. Xander thought he could get to like this place. This place in ...New York? New Orleans? New Something. Whatever. He'd been on the road for six months. The half of Anya's insurance money that he'd allotted himself for fucking off with was running low, and he'd have to settle somewhere soon, at least long enough to work a little and build up his cash reserve. Again, whatever. Yes, nice bartender, I would like another. Thanks.

Six months of driving, stopping whenever a town looked interesting or he'd needed to do laundry had taken their toll. The clothes he'd brought with him hung on his gaunt frame, and his hair was long and wavy, generally shoved impatiently behind his neck with little thought. Shaving happened occasionally, this morning being the latest occasion. Drinking happened every day, at

least a little - enough to get by and not think too much past the next shot or beer.

He normally didn't go places that had live music, but this one seemed OK. The band wasn't overly loud, and the singer didn't speak between numbers, simply moving from one mid-tempo rock song to the next with a minimum of distraction for the drinkers. A nice bar was Xander's only requirement - a place where he could be reasonably certain not to get assaulted or mugged, a place where everyone minded their own business - most assuredly not a place where everyone knew his name. Some days he wasn't even sure what his name was - he'd not heard anyone say it in so long.

That's probably why it took a second for his brain to register that the singer behind him had actually said what he thought he'd heard. A low bass line began to roll through the bar, and Xander turned to look at the singer. The singer who was Spike. The singer who had just announced quietly that the next song was for "my old friend, Xander". The vampire simply stood behind the microphone with his hands in the pockets of his duster, swaying slightly to the hypnotic music. He was wearing black jeans, a black tee and his scuffed Docs. His platinum hair was worn a little longer than in Sunnydale, and wasn't gelled quite so ruthlessly to the planes of his skull as before, allowing some natural curl to

show. His crystal blue eyes glittered in the stage light. He cut his eyes to Xander and locked them on the human's face as he began to sing in a low growl.

*Everybody knows that the dice are loaded  
Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed  
Everybody knows that the war is over  
Everybody knows the good guys lost  
Everybody knows the fight was fixed  
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich  
That's how it goes  
Everybody knows*

Xander felt like Spike was singing directly to him, and felt the blood drain out of his face. During the short pause in the lyrics, the vampire's hands came up to wrap around the neck of the mic, his eyes never leaving Xander's.

*Everybody knows that the boat is leaking  
Everybody knows that the captain lied  
Everybody got this broken feeling  
Like their father or their dog just died*

*Everybody talking to their pockets  
Everybody wants a box of chocolates  
And a long stem rose  
Everybody knows*

Spike shifted the mic from the base and moved the stand to one side. He eased his body down into a tense crouch, elbows resting on spread

knees, still looking up at Xander, who felt pinned to his seat. The human raised his drink and drained it, never looking away from the stage.

*Everybody knows that you love me baby  
Everybody knows that you really do  
Everybody knows that you've been faithful  
Ah give or take a night or two  
Everybody knows you've been discreet  
But there were so many people you just had to  
meet  
Without your clothes  
And everybody knows*

*Everybody knows, everybody knows  
That's how it goes  
Everybody knows*

*Everybody knows, everybody knows  
That's how it goes  
Everybody knows*

Spike rose gracefully to his feet and placed one hand on the microphone stand, turning his profile to most of the audience for the final verses of the song, eyes still boring into Xander's.

*And everybody knows that it's now or never  
Everybody knows that it's me or you  
And everybody knows that you live forever  
Ah when you've done a line or two  
Everybody knows the deal is rotten  
Old Black Joe's still pickin' cotton*

*For your ribbons and bows  
And everybody knows*

*And everybody knows that the Plague is coming  
Everybody knows that it's moving fast  
Everybody knows that the naked man and  
woman*

*Are just a shining artifact of the past  
Everybody knows the scene is dead  
But there's gonna be a meter on your bed  
That will disclose  
What everybody knows*

*And everybody knows that you're in trouble  
Everybody knows what you've been through  
From the bloody cross on top of Calvary  
To the beach of Malibu  
Everybody knows it's coming apart  
Take one last look at this Sacred Heart  
Before it blows  
And everybody knows*

*Everybody knows, everybody knows  
That's how it goes  
Everybody knows*

*Oh everybody knows, everybody knows  
That's how it goes  
Everybody knows*

The song ended and the stage lights blacked out. The small crowd clapped enthusiastically, at least, until the lure of the next round made them

forget the striking spectacle of Spike singing Leonard Cohen. Xander was still sitting half-turned on his barstool when a full glass replaced the empty one in front of him. He turned around and nodded to the bartender. Xander heard the creak of leather as Spike slid onto the barstool next to him and suddenly found the glint of light off of the JD in his glass endlessly fascinating.

They'd sat in silence and finished off several more drinks before Spike took the stage for his second set. Xander had listened to the songs with his back resolutely toward the stage while drinking a soda and drawing patterns in the condensation on the side of his glass. After the second set, Spike had appeared again at his side.

"You got somewhere to stay?" he asked, lighting a cigarette.

"Nope. Just got into town today." Xander drained the dregs of his soda and crunched the last piece of ice between even, white teeth.

"I've got a friend's place while he's out of town. Wanna crash?" Spike looked supremely indifferent as to Xander's response.

"OK, thanks. It's early yet - what do you do in this town for fun?"

"Come on. I'll show you."

Just before dawn, they stumbled into Spike's friend's apartment. It turned out to be a nice two-bedroom in a decent building. Every window in the place was securely covered, so Xander assumed Spike's friend was also of the vampire persuasion. He didn't really care, as long as he got to lie down. The struggle to remain upright on the precariously tilting planet was becoming a strain. As soon as he was ushered to a nicely appointed guest room, he wasted no time in passing out face-down on the bed.

The next day, the two men had picked up their friendship as if they'd never fallen out. Xander got Spike to tell him all about his burgeoning singing career, and the vampire was pleasantly shocked to find that the human had some good ideas for maximizing his potential.

Over the next several weeks Spike found that having an associate who could get around in the daylight was useful, and Xander found that he enjoyed wrangling with club owners to get gigs for Spike. They fell into an easy working relationship. When the apartment's owner returned home, Spike and Xander set out for Los Angeles to see if they could capitalize on the vampire's growing following in the music world. Sunnydale rarely came up in conversation. Spike never asked why Xander had left, and Xander never offered any information.

## Part Five

As usual, the backstage area was a madhouse. Xander strode through the tangle of technicians, musicians, dancers, starstruck fans and assorted other bodies with the finesse of an experienced waiter navigating the lunch rush, deftly dodging and weaving. The young woman following him matched him step for step and their conversation never faltered. An outsider would think them siblings; the woman shared his height and dark coloring, with wavy chestnut hair that fell to her shoulders in an expensive touse. Her snapping brown eyes were covered with a pair of fashionable glasses, and her lips were a bold slash of red. Her jeans and tour tee shirt clung to a curvy figure, and she carried a clipboard, occasionally making a note as she walked.

"Make sure the pyro techs have the updated set list, and point out that the last three songs have been re-ordered - we don't need another Milwaukee," Xander said, sharing a grimace with the girl as they both recalled a near-disaster in which Spike had come uncomfortably close to being barbecued. The techs responsible had been fired after receiving the most scathing bitching out from Spike that Xander could ever remember - and that was saying something.

"Anything else, Xan?" she asked, looking at him as they stopped outside Spike's dressing room.

He shrugged. "Nope, Annie, I think that's it. What are you going to do with your two weeks off?"

"Aruba!" she exclaimed, grinning. "I'm going to spend it in the sun - I don't get to work on my tan much when I travel with you guys."

Xander grinned at her. "You're not wrong about that." He sighed. "I guess I'll go see what the disaster of the day is." He turned the doorknob and took a deep breath before entering the room. Annie wisely turned and hurried off down the corridor.

"Hey, Xan," Spike said. The vampire was sitting on the sofa reading a book. As the door opened, he marked his place with a finger and looked up to greet his friend.

"Hey," Xander answered, looking around in a confused manner. "What's up?"

"Not much. Just hanging out." He turned back to his book, marking his page with a slip of paper and tossing it onto the side table. "Everything ready?"

"Yeah," Xander said slowly, looking around. He took a couple of hesitant steps into the room,

and then looked around again. "Are you possessed?" he asked, plaintively.

"Not that I know of," Spike replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Well," Xander said. "You aren't stomping around in a diva snit, there aren't a dozen groupies in here sighing over your every twitch, and nothing is on fire or broken. It's just not normal."

Spike gestured to the sofa cushion beside him. "Sit." Xander sat. He jumped a little when Spike's cool hand came to rest on the middle of his back. "I know you're worried about talking to Buffy, and I thought I'd give you a break," the vampire explained.

Xander dropped his head into his hands. "I knew it. You're possessed."

"Wanker."

"Dork."

"Blow me."

"In your dreams, overbite."

"Only my better ones, pet. Only my better ones."

Xander was saved from responding by the arrival of the hairdresser, makeup artist and stylist, ushered in by Annie. The brunette girl slid onto the couch next to Xander and watched as Spike

was pulled to the center of the room. The stylist, an older man, began efficiently stripping the vampire's black tee shirt off over his head, replacing it with a red one. Spike snatched the black leather pants out of the man's hands and turned his back to his audience to switch them with his faded jeans. Every person in the room stared unabashedly at the pale backside that was exposed and then re-covered with the skin-tight trousers. The stylist threaded a belt around Spike's waist and buckled it, then stepped back.

"I'm done," he said. "Docs and duster are on the rack. See you tomorrow."

"Later, Phil," Spike said, as the other man left the room. Then, addressing Xander and Annie, he said, "Why do we pay him all that money, again?"

"Because he knows the guy who custom makes the pants and dusters. That, and he sometimes gets you to wear really cool stuff. Not today, of course, but sometimes," Annie said. Spike gave her the two-fingered salute and allowed the hairdresser to push him into a chair. A harried-looking man with a headset and a clipboard came to the door and gestured at Annie. She gave Xander a smile and hurried out the door. Xander sat back and watched as Spike's hair was slicked back with gel and his eyes were heavily outlined with artfully smudged kohl. The vampire stood

and struck a pose for Xander, while the hair and makeup artists packed their things and swept out.

"Am I presentable, pet?" Spike asked.

"You'll do," Xander replied, climbing to his feet and running a hand through his own tousled hair, pushing the long fringe off his forehead.

"You gonna call Buffy after I go on?" Spike asked.

"Yeah," Xander sighed. "I have to."

Spike walked over and laid a hand on Xander's shoulder. "Yeah, you do." Xander couldn't help noticing for the thousandth time that Spike was considerably shorter without his boots. Spike's attitude was so large that it obscured the fact that he was slim and rather compact. Xander knew for a fact that Spike's head fitted exactly into the crook of his neck if the two of them stood in an embrace. Xander looked at the floor, then back at Spike.

"Yeah, I do," he said. "Get your boots and duster on - it's almost time."

Spike mock-sighed, "Another day, another million dollars."

They shared a "damn we're lucky" grin and Spike moved on to finish dressing. Xander sat on the

couch and fingered his cell phone. Spike was just settling the leather coat around his shoulders when there was a knock on the door. The vampire shot a look at the broody man on the couch before he opened it to find another man with a headset and a clipboard. He turned back into the room.

"Come over to the stage once you're done, OK, Xan?"

Xander nodded, and Spike allowed himself to be led away.

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"Hello?"

"Hey, Buffy. It's Xander."

"Xander. I'm so happy you called." Buffy's voice was warm and friendly.

"Why?" Xander asked, truly dumbfounded.

"Because you're my friend and I've missed you," she said simply.

"Oh, shit," he groaned, "It's worse than I thought. You're going to be all nice to me, aren't you? Please don't, Buffy. I don't think I can handle nice. I really think I need yelling and cursing and name-calling."

She giggled. "You're babbling, Xander."

"Yes, yes I am," he replied. There was a long pause. "I'm sorry, Buffy," Xander said in a tiny voice. "I'm so damn sorry."

Her voice was even when she answered. "What are you sorry for, Xan? Bringing me back? Helping me heal? Hitting me? Leaving?"

"Most of it. All of it. Yes."

"Can we take them one at a time?" she asked, and then continued without waiting for an answer. "I'm glad you guys brought me back, Xan. I wasn't at the time, but I am now. Look at all the things I got to do because of what you did. I got to raise Dawn, and see her go to medical school and graduate at the top of her class. I got to be the only Slayer in the history of Slayers to retire. I got to help train a Slayer, though I hate that Faith had to die for me to be able to do it." Her voice broke a little and she stopped to clear her throat.

"I got to go to college and graduate and get a normal job. I got to see Angel get his reward - he and I got to spend a couple of years in the sun. That alone was worth the price of admission, Xander. So you don't owe me an apology for giving me another chance to live, OK?"

Xander felt a lump form in his throat as he thought about Angel. The older vampire had

finally achieved his redemption five years previously. Through a mystical process called shanshu, he'd been made human. He and Buffy had been together for almost two years when he was killed. He hadn't been able to give up the fight against evil, and his human frailty had been his undoing. Spike had attended the funeral in LA, but Xander had been unable to force himself to face his friends.

"OK, Buffy," Xander said thickly. "I'm not sorry about that, then. Besides, it's terrible to have to be sad because your best friend isn't dead. My brain didn't like it."

"And the part after I came back, Xan? Don't be sorry about loving me, please don't. You were the only thing that kept me going, and I used you and hurt you so much. I'm the one who should be sorry. I was so awful to you." She sounded miserable. Xander wanted to say something, but words wouldn't come. He felt tears fill his eyes and begin to spill silently down his cheeks.

"Buffy," he said finally, and he hated the wavery quality of his voice. "I...I hit you."

"I know," she replied, and her voice held tears also. "I can't tell you it's OK, Xander, but I can tell you that I forgave you a long time ago, and I know you'd never, ever do it again."

Xander felt a flare of anger. "You don't know that," he gritted out. "I couldn't control myself with you. I loved you, Buffy - God, I loved you more than anything, and I hit you. If I could do it to you I could do it to anybody. How can you say that you forgive me?" Tears were flowing freely now, and Xander didn't care that Buffy could hear his distress.

She made soothing sounds into the phone, wiping her own tears as she listened to his muffled sobs. Once he got control, she began speaking in a calm voice.

"You're wrong, Xander. You'd never do it again. People who hurt other people like that don't feel remorse. They don't feel like they have to leave everything they know to protect their loved ones. And they don't torture themselves like this. You have got to forgive yourself. Yes, you hit me. Once." She paused. "Would it help you to know that it didn't hurt?"

Xander couldn't stop the hysterical giggle that welled up in him at her wry tone. His giggle triggered hers, and soon they were both laughing as hard as they could into their respective phones, unable to catch their breath. After a long while, they fell silent. Xander could hear Buffy blow her nose, and he dashed tears away from his eyes with his free hand.

"I've missed you, Buff," Xander said.

"I've missed you, too. Are we OK now?"

"I think we're on our way," he said, and was pleasantly surprised to find that he meant it. "Now, tell me more about this party."

An hour later, Xander wandered over to the stage, with his cell phone still pressed to his ear. Buffy had spent most of the time catching him up on the lives of the Sunnydale crew. Xander had already heard much of the news from Willow, but he was happy to simply listen to Buffy's excited chatter. He walked to the edge of the back of the stage, where Spike was finishing up a medium tempo ballad. After the deafening cheers faded, the vampire looked over. He noticed Xander and smiled. He pointed at the cell phone and spread his hands in a questioning gesture. Xander smiled and nodded. In a flash, Spike was at his side, taking the cell phone and walking back to center stage.

"Hello, Slayer," the vampire purred.

"Hi, Spike," she replied brightly. Spike brought his microphone closer to his mouth. "Buffy, this is everybody; everybody, this is Buffy." He held the phone out to the audience, and 16,000 people roared "Hi, Buffy!". Spike put the phone back to his ear in time to catch her whooping laughter.

"Anything special you wanna hear, Buffy?" he asked. She thought for a second, and then made her choice. Spike carried the phone back to Xander.

"Hold this so she can hear, mate," he instructed, turning to strut back to center stage with his coat billowing behind him. "This is for my friend Buffy," he told the audience. He turned to the guitarist and whispered for a second. His instructions were passed to the rest of the band members. A second later the rumbling bass line of one of Spike's early hits rolled out across the arena, prompting another roar from the crowd. The vampire began singing in a baritone growl.

*Standing in the doorway of my life in this house  
Trying to find a way to get out  
Looking for a sign that I should open the door  
This craziness is getting me down*

*But today is the day  
That we break free  
Today is the day  
That we break free*

At the chorus, Spike twirled and stalked across the stage. He sang the next verse standing hip to hip with the guitarist

*Walking down a stairway to the traffic below  
Anything could happen I know  
Hey but I'm sick of everybody telling me what to*

*do*

*I hear you, hey, but I already know*

*Because today is the day*

*That we break free*

*Today is the day*

*That we break free*

The vampire strutted across the stage, every inch a rock star. Xander could only smile and marvel at how far they had come from the early days.

*It's clear in my mind after all of this time*

*What I feel, my love*

*There's so many times that the sun doesn't shine*

*But I'm here, my love*

*And today is the day*

*Maybe I should wait just a minute or two*

*It's getting cold now and I feel so insecure*

*The future is a mistress that is so hard to please*

*And the past is a pebble in my shoe*

*But today is the day*

*That we break free*

*Today is the day*

*That we break free*

*It's clear in my mind after all of this time*

*What I feel, my love*

*There's so many times that the sun doesn't shine*

*But I'm here, my love*

*And today is the day*

As the last notes of the song died away, the crowd roared its approval. Xander put the phone back to his ear and stepped further into the backstage area.

"How'd you like that? Performance on demand," he said.

"Dawn's going to be so jealous when I tell her," Buffy said.

They talked for a few more minutes, and then ended the call. Xander slipped the phone into his pocket just as Spike exited the stage for his set break, with two large bodyguards in tow. The vampire grabbed his arm as he swept by and dragged Xander along to the green room, which was inexplicably painted orange. The guards stayed outside. Xander settled on a sofa while Spike stripped off his duster and tee shirt, pulling on a white tank and a sapphire blue overshirt, which he left unbuttoned. He perched next to Xander.

"My hair OK?" he asked.

Xander reached out to smooth a couple of errant curls back, unconsciously tracing his fingers down the arch of bone behind Spike's ear.

"You're good," he said.

Spike leaned slightly into Xander's light touch and fought the urge to close his eyes. "You and Buffy on the mend, then?" he said.

Xander realized where his hand was and slowly drew it back. "Looks like," he said, "though I have no idea why she's being so nice."

"Don't be dumb, pet," Spike explained with a sigh. "She's the Slayer, or a Slayer; if anyone understands the lure of physical violence, it's her. She knows that you acted out of pain and frustration, not a desire to hurt."

"You know it wigs me out when you're insightful, right?" Xander said.

"S why I do it, luv. You coming back to the stage for the second half?"

"I'll be over in a while. You wanna go out after?"

"Nah. Let's stay in. This town is beat. 'Sides, I need to eat when we get back to the hotel."

"I'm hungry, too," Xander said, realizing that in his nervous state he hadn't eaten all day. "You want food food, too?"

"Sure," the vampire smiled. There was a knock at the door. Spike stood and pulled his shirt straight. He ran a hand over his hair and headed back to work.

*\*Today Poe (Yes, I know, Poe is a woman. However, I've used several of her songs for Spike – the vibe is perfect – you just have to use your imagination on the voice.)*

## **Part Six**

The bodyguard, Isha, leaned comfortably against the wall, waiting. Spike stood in front of him, gently holding the large man's right arm. Isha's vaguely Asian features wore an expression of relaxation, tinged with excitement. He looked over the vampire's head at Xander, who was sitting at a small table across the room contemplating the tray of appetizers in front of him. Catching Isha's look, Xander smiled reassuringly.

Spike morphed into game face and bent his head to the tender skin on the inside of Isha's elbow. He carefully sank his fangs into the large vein there and began to draw on the small wounds. The sweet, hot blood began to fill his mouth, soothing the ache of hunger in his belly. Isha's blood told him everything the big man was feeling. Pleasure, arousal and a hint of fear. Spike didn't blame him - Isha had been the one to witness his loss of control with Ace, which was part of the reason he'd asked Xander to stay in

the room while he fed, and would do so for the foreseeable future. He relied on the bodyguards too much to start scaring them away.

The idea of carrying Spike's blood supply "on the hoof" had, surprisingly, been Xander's. The vampire had been stunned when the human had suggested it, but it made perfect sense. Spike felt a surge of gratitude when he thought about the other life-changing idea Xander had brought to him.

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"Finally! God, I thought you were never gonna get up!" Xander was so excited he was practically bouncing. The excitement did not magically transfer itself to the groggy vampire stumbling up the hall. Spike stopped in the doorway to the kitchen and leaned on the wall, rubbing his eyes. Xander turned from the microwave and pushed a mug of warmed blood into his hands.

"Drink up, then come to the office. I want to show you something."

Spike drank the blood slowly, then rinsed the mug and placed it into the sink. He rubbed his eyes again, and wondered what the hell had gotten his friend and business partner into such a state. Curiosity got the better of him, and he trudged to the small office, marginally more awake than before. Xander was sitting in a black

leather swivel chair in front of a small desk. He was typing into the computer. Spike walked up behind him and noticed that the spreadsheet program was open.

"What's got you so happy, mate?" he asked.

"Check this out," Xander said, pointing to the screen. "That is the total income for XS Holdings for the year."

The vampire leaned in and looked at the page. Then he leaned in closer, to make sure that the decimal point was where he thought it was. It was. The column showed a number well in excess of one million dollars.

"Is that for real?" he asked, stepping back from the machine.

Xander stood up from his chair. "Yep. We made a million bucks, Spike." The two men looked at each other silently for a moment, and then Spike stepped forward to clap Xander on the back.

"Damn, we're good," he said, as they exchanged grins. "So, pet, what do you want to do to celebrate?"

The smile dropped off of Xander's face, and he looked nervous. "Um," he said, looking down. "I think we should see about getting that fucking chip out of your head."

Spike was speechless for the first time in over a hundred years. He couldn't think of a response that would do the offer justice. He swallowed heavily against the lump in his throat and turned his back to Xander, rubbing his hand across his eyes.

Without turning, he said, "Why would you want to do that, Xander?" His voice was carefully devoid of inflection.

"Look at me," Xander said, his voice low and steady. Spike turned, and his blue eyes were suspiciously bright as they stared into calm brown ones. "It's the right thing to do." Their gazes held for long moments. Spike nodded once, then turned and walked back into the kitchen.

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Spike opened his eyes and gently disengaged from Isha's arm, running his tongue over the small punctures to close them. "Thanks, mate," he told the large man, accepting a smile and a nod in return as Isha left the suite, deftly catching the bottle of orange juice Xander tossed to him. Spike wiped a hand across his mouth to make sure he didn't have any blood on his lips and joined Xander at the small dining table, snaring the last shrimp on the appetizer platter.

"Better?" Xander asked, finishing off a stuffed mushroom.

"Yeah, I'm good," Spike replied. "What do you want to eat?"

"I'm feeling the need to worship at the temple of the cow - prime rib style, I believe," the human said.

"Cool. Get me one of those and some fries - NFG on the steak," Spike said, using their long-standing code for "no fucking garlic".

Xander picked up the phone to order as Spike walked to the luxurious bathroom.

The room service waiter arrived, stalled hoping to get a glimpse of Spike, and then reluctantly left. Xander knocked at the bathroom door.

"Come in," Spike invited.

Xander was unsurprised to find the vampire lounging in the large bathtub, up to his neck in steaming water. They often joked that Spike's exorbitant hot water fetish was one of the reasons they lived in hotels. He loved to feel warm - hot baths and showers, expensive cashmere socks and sweaters and electric blankets were all necessary objects for Spike to be happy.

"Food's here," Xander said, and swept a couple of fluffy towels off of the heated rack on the wall. Spike stood and accepted a proffered towel, wrapping it around his waist. He took the other and rubbed his hair. Xander wandered back to the front room. A few minutes later, Spike appeared, wearing faded jeans and a white sweater, barefoot, with his damp hair curling around his face. He plopped next to Xander on the couch and started in on his very rare steak. At one point, Spike felt the steak's juices running in a small rivulet from the corner of his mouth. Xander deftly reached over and wiped the blood away with his napkin, then continued eating.

That small gesture threw Spike back in time to what he would always remember as one of the best days of his unlife. Shortly after Xander's announcement of his intention to have the chip removed, Spike had agreed to be examined by a doctor the human had located for him. The doctor had turned out to be a Cathaxis demon - able to appear human, but very tall and thin. The Cathaxis were notable for their ability to see electrical energy. The doctor/ demon had simply looked at Spike's head for ten minutes without blinking, then nodded and left the room. Xander had followed it, then returned a few minutes later.

"What?" Spike had demanded irritably.

"Chill," Xander said, "she's a fan, and you make her nervous. When they get nervous, they can't talk. Some sort of vocal cord paralysis thing. Freaky. Anyway, she says that the chip will have to come out surgically - shorting it out would probably fry your brain. She's referring us to a surgeon." He handed a prescription pad to the vampire. "She also wants your autograph."

Shaking his head at the absurdity, Spike wrote out an autograph. Two weeks later he was checked into Cedars Sinai Medical Center under his favorite pseudonym, Alexander Summers, for brain surgery. Spike had blustered at first, but Xander assured him that, with enough money, a vampire really could have brain surgery at a world-famous hospital with little or no fanfare, and they happened to have enough money. That's exactly how it had gone. They'd stayed in a luxuriously appointed suite with no windows. The surgery had taken more than ten hours with a human surgeon and a mixed surgical team. Spike had been well taken care of and stuffed with blood fresh from the blood bank. Two nights later, he had signed autographs for the whole group and walked out under his own power to a waiting limousine.

The limousine had arrived at the hotel, and Xander had exited and watched as the car pulled away with Spike still inside. Two hours later, the door of their suite had opened. Spike strode in,

looking every inch the Master vampire. Xander had stood from the sofa where he was reading and met him in the foyer. Spike's hair was mussed, his shirt was wrinkled, and there was a smear of blood along his jaw. Xander had taken a cloth napkin from the bar and gently wiped it away. They had both looked down at the bright streak of red on the white linen.

"I didn't kill anyone," Spike said in a neutral tone.

"That's good," Xander said, his tone every bit as bland as the vampire's. "You feeling OK?"

"A little tired," Spike said. "Busy couple of days."

Xander had nodded and wandered off to return to his book.

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"What do you want to do now?" Spike asked Xander.

"Not much to do - last show tomorrow, and then off to Sunnydale," the human replied.

"Are you nervous about going home?"

"Where, Sunnydale? Sunnydale's not my home." Xander's tone was indifferent as he gathered the dinner dishes and returned them to the room service tray.

"Where is?"

"Huh?"

"Where is home?"

Xander pondered the question for a moment. "I dunno," he said, "wherever we are, I guess." Spike watched as the human carried the tray to the door of the suite. He heard Xander exchange a few words with the bodyguard on duty, and then a click as the lock on the door engaged.

"I have to tell you something you aren't going to like," Xander said, once he'd flopped back down on one end of the overstuffed couch. Spike merely raised an eyebrow at him. "Dawn wants you to give a speech at her graduation party. The other girls' parents are doing it, and she wants you and Buffy to stand in as Mom and Dad." He closed his eyes and braced himself for the yelling and screaming. When none were forthcoming, he cracked one eye open to see if the vampire had merely melted into a puddle of denial. Spike looked gobsmacked.

"She does? Really?" The wonder in his voice made Xander's chest tighten a little.

"Of course she does," he said softly, "both of you have been behind her all the way. Hell, Spike - remember when you flew to Sunnydale to talk her down when she wanted to drop out of med school and join the Peace Corps? And the time

you were an hour and a half late on stage in Japan because she was hysterical on the phone, thinking she was going to fail Gross Anatomy?"

"Organic Chemistry," the vampire corrected automatically, "but, yeah, I remember. I'm just really surprised, I guess." He sat for a few minutes, and then an indignant look came over his face. "Oi!" he shouted, "I don't want to give a speech!"

Xander laughed. "I was wondering when that part would sink in," he said mildly.

"Fucking hell," the vampire swore.

"Why don't you sing her something - you can claim that you sing better than you talk."

Spike marveled at Xander. "Damn, every once in a while you're pretty smart," he said.

Xander winked at the vampire. "I have my moments." Forcing himself to speak in a casual tone, he added, "We should probably get everyone presents. You think we can make Annie buy them?"

"Nah, I'll do some online shopping." Spike's voice was as studiously casual as Xander's. "Should I sign the cards from both of us?"

"Sure," the human rejoined. His tone then became pointed. "Like you always do?"

Spike had the good grace to look away, and Xander could have sworn he saw the faintest blush of color staining his alabaster cheeks. Xander scooted over on the sofa until their legs were just touching. "Thank you, Spike," he said. "I appreciate you keeping up the friendships I neglected - you didn't have to do that for me." Spike turned back and smiled, and Xander knew that his eyes were mirroring the small spark of heat in the vampire's, and he felt himself blushing just a little.

Spike's head tilted slightly to one side, and for a second, Xander thought the vampire was going to kiss him. Panic and desire bloomed in his chest, and he fought equally strong urges to move closer and move away. Spike broke the eye contact and abruptly stood and walked over to the windows, pulling the heavy drapes aside to look out into the night.

"It's late," he observed, and his voice was slightly strained. "I think I'll turn in." Xander watched him walk into his bedroom and shut the door.

## **Part Seven**

Xander was attempting to finish signing the sheaf of papers on the desk in front of him, but kept getting distracted by Spike, who was tapping his feet, tapping his fingers and generally making a pest of himself from his perch on the edge of one of the couch cushions. The vampire had wandered into the office, paced around it several times, picked up and replaced every object on Xander's desk in turn, then flung himself down onto the couch with a long-suffering sigh. He was ready to go on stage a full hour before his call time and he was voluntarily spending time in the business office - two things that never happened.

Xander laid his pen down on the desk and looked at Spike, who was momentarily absorbed in picking at his chipped black nail polish. His hair was a tangle of carefully arranged "casual" waves that fell over his forehead to touch his dark eyebrows, his eyes were thickly lined, and the pale pink of his lips had been darkened a couple of shades. Apparently, Annie had managed to wrangle him into wearing "something cool", as his usual tee shirt had been traded in for a blood-red burnout velvet shirt, worn almost completely unbuttoned over black leather trousers so extremely low-slung that Xander could practically see pubic hair. His ragged Docs had been replaced with motorcycle boots, and the silver chains that decorated them matched the ones around his hips, both wrists and his neck.

"Last show," Xander observed. "How're you feeling?"

"Good. Ready to be done. I'm sick of the set list." Spike's cadence was rapid, and Xander noticed he was chewing gum. He was chewing the hell out of that gum.

"Last groupies for a few weeks. Unless, of course, you plan to fuck Dawn's friends." Xander tilted his head. "You aren't planning to fuck Dawn's friends, right?"

Spike threw him a withering look, which was immediately followed up with an impish smile. "Uh...no. I do have a modicum of self control."

"Sometimes," Xander rejoined, with a smile of his own.

"You ready for the trip? You and Buffy all lovey-dovey now?" The vampire's voice sounded funny, but Xander couldn't read the tone.

"I wouldn't go that far," he said thoughtfully.

"Give it time," Spike said.

"Yes, oh wise one," Xander joked.

Hey, wisdom of the years, here, young pup. And - deadly predator, just as soon kill ya as look at ya," Spike sneered.

"Yeah, yeah. Big Bad. I remember," Xander affected boredom.

"Don't patronize me," Spike grouched.

"Go sing. Make the girlies fling their panties on the stage." Xander stood and crossed the room, offering a hand to pull Spike to his feet. They stood face to face for a moment. "Is Ace waiting for you?"

"Yeah," Spike said. "He's probably chatting up birds at the stage door."

"Ace likes boys," Xander said.

"Ace likes you," Spike replied.

"Not," Xander said. He reached up to straighten Spike's collar and let the backs of his fingers graze the cool skin of the vampire's neck lightly. "I think it's safe to say that every being under this roof, regardless of species or gender wants you tonight."

"S that right?" Spike drawled, stepping a fraction of an inch closer. "Every being?"

Xander looked into Spike's eyes, and his own narrowed slightly. He deliberately took one small step back and smiled tightly. "Go sing," he said softly. Spike's head tilted and Xander caught a glimpse of the vampire's pointed pink tongue as he moistened his lips before he took first one and

then another step backward before turning to sweep out of the room.

As the door shut, Xander let out the breath he'd been holding. He picked his cell phone up from the desk and pressed a button. As soon as it was answered he said, "Annie, find out who gave Spike the coke and kill them for me, would you?" He disconnected the call and dropped the phone onto the desk, then fell heavily into the chair.

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Xander waited in the back seat of the limousine. The show had been spectacular - one of Spike's best ever. Xander had walked over and watched from the wings, staying out of the vampire's sight. From his vantage point, he had watched Spike strut and posture his way through almost two hours of his most aggressive songs. The band had been spot-on, the dancers beautiful and sexy and the crowd full of energy. The backstage area had had a party-like atmosphere, with everyone celebrating the end of the first leg of the tour and talking about what they were going to do with their two week break.

Xander had perched himself on a high stool and taken it all in, basking in his pride at their accomplishments. It was hard to believe that the Zeppo and the chipped vamp had turned themselves into a multi-million dollar industry. Xander marveled at the thought that all of these

people, save Spike, worked for him, deferred to him, valued his opinion and courted his favor. It was heady stuff.

At the set break, Xander had stayed where he was, deciding not to join Spike in the dressing room. He was surprised to see the vampire return to the stage wearing a simple, soft-looking grey tee with his leather pants, having ditched the chains and boots in favor of stocking feet. Spike had pulled a stool similar to the one Xander was occupying to center stage and proceeded to sing ballads for a full hour, delighting the girls in the audience and stunning Xander all over again with the quality of the rich baritone voice he'd heard almost every day for the past ten years.

Eventually, Xander had left his stool and gone back to the office to gather his things. While Spike was finishing up on stage, the human packed his briefcase and made the rounds of the staff, shaking hands, receiving a few kisses and hugs, and taking his leave. He'd then walked out to the car and opened a bottle of water from the bar, relaxing in the silence.

The car door opened, and Spike slid onto the seat. Xander noticed he still wasn't wearing shoes. "I guess you really were sick of the set list, huh?" he asked mildly.

"Yeah, well. What's the point of being a pain in the ass rock star if you can't stir things up once in a while?" the vampire said. He reached for Xander's water bottle and Xander let it go.

"I'm guessing the pyro guys were the only ones who were pissed," Xander said.

"They can blow me up another time," Spike deadpanned.

The front doors of the car opened and Ace and Carl got in. Ace turned around from the driver's seat to peer into the open partition. "Hotel?" he asked. Xander looked at Spike.

"That's fine," Spike said, finishing the water and opening another. He pushed the button to close the partition.

"You say all your goodbyes?" Xander asked.

"Three fuck offs, a see ya later and a kiss," Spike said.

"Annie?"

"Annie. When's the flight to LA?"

"Tomorrow at 8. It's commercial." At Spike's grimace he added, "We have all of First Class, don't whine. It'll be fine."

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Xander punched his pillow, trying to coerce it into the one elusive shape that would make it possible for him to fall asleep. The pillow steadfastly refused to conform. Xander sighed loudly and stared at the ceiling. There was a soft knock at the door.

"Can I come in?" Spike asked.

"Of course," Xander replied, and the door opened a crack. The slim vampire slipped into the room and closed the door. He walked over to the bed and stood beside it, looking down expectantly. Xander took in the bare chest and rumpled cotton pants. "Can't sleep?"

"Still wired from the show," Spike admitted.

"And the coke." Xander's tone was mild.

"Wasn't much," Spike groused.

"How about you don't tell me. I'm on vacation," Xander said.

"Shove over," Spike said, forcing his way onto the bed and under the covers. He manhandled Xander until the human vacated his abused pillow and moved to the far side of the bed. They wound up lying side by side on their backs, almost but not quite touching.

"Comfy now?" Xander asked, sarcastically.

"Mmmm."

After a few moments of silence, Xander tucked his hands under his head and shifted so he could look at Spike. "You looking forward to seeing Dawn?" he asked.

Spike also shifted to his side. "Yeah, I guess I am. You?"

"Yeah." Quiet descended again.

"You bringing your guitar with?" Spike asked.

"Don't you think I need the practice?" Xander rejoined.

"Do you always answer a question with a question?" Xander could hear the grin in Spike's voice. This was a game they played often, and it drove most of the crew absolutely insane.

"Why do you always ask me that?" Xander inquired with a false note of hurt in his voice.

"How should I know?" The vampire's exasperation was equally false.

"What do you mean?" This time Xander attempted to sound plaintive, but his giggle ruined it.

"Is this an attempt to make me insane?" Spike asked.

"What makes you think you're not already insane?" Xander's giggle threatened to morph into a full-blown guffaw.

"Why do I think that's a rhetorical question?" Spike's attempt at plaintive was marginally better than Xander's.

"You think you're pretty smart, don't you?" Xander freed one of his hands to push at the other man's shoulder.

"Why shouldn't I?" Spike preened.

"Have you ever considered modesty?" Xander asked seriously.

"Don't you think that sort of thing is overrated?" Spike kicked Xander's shin lightly.

Xander turned his back to Spike and pulled the blanket over his shoulder. "Can we go to sleep now?"

Spike leaned over and carefully covered an exposed portion of the human's back. His unnecessary breath puffed against Xander's neck as he asked, "Don't I get a goodnight kiss?"

Xander froze, and Spike backed off, moving to his own pillow.

"Go to sleep, Spike," Xander said quietly.

The room was silent for a minute.

"I win," Spike whispered.

"You think?" Xander said.

"Shut up."

### **Part Eight**

Xander kicked off his loafers and stretched his arms out along the back of the seat. He let his head rest against the butter-soft leather and relaxed. God, this was the life. He wondered briefly just when he'd become so accustomed to an existence that included perks like never having to drive yourself, maids who picked up the wet towels, restaurants for most meals, Annie to take care of the details and little to worry about other than Spike. He mentally reviewed that list. Yep, Spike had somehow become his responsibility. How the hell had that happened?

Sure, the bodyguards took care of some things and Annie others, but somewhere along the way Xander had assumed the title of Spike-wrangler. And, somewhere along the way, Spike had submitted to being wrangled. He was still a massive pain in the ass at times, but for the most part he played the game. Early on, Spike's

hedonism had threatened the small empire they'd built from the early bar appearances. Too many groupies, too many drugs, too many trashed hotel rooms and too many threatened lawsuits had caused Xander to lay down the law. Spike had chafed at the restrictions at first, but the human's careful, heartfelt pleas for Spike to please stop fucking up their fun, happy and above all profitable life had finally penetrated.

It was during that time that Xander had started booking himself and Spike into two-bedroom suites. It started as a convenience; it was easier for Xander to keep tabs on the vampire that way. After a while, they both realized that they enjoyed the company. On rare occasions, Spike would knock on Xander's door, invite himself into the bed and sleep there, close but not touching. Xander never turned him away, but he never went to Spike's room either. He also didn't spend a lot of time thinking about it.

Even with the close supervision of Xander and the bodyguards, Spike still managed to get into a fair amount of trouble. He was ruthless in using his fame, his looks and his innate sensuality to get what he wanted, and Xander's firing of CJ had merely been the last in a long line of similar dismissals. It was well known that supplying Spike with drugs or the few other things Xander found unacceptable was an express ticket to unemployment. Spike never held the firings

against Xander, and Xander never held their necessity against Spike. Each fully understood the others' nature, and acted accordingly.

The door of the limo opened, and Spike slipped inside. He looked at Xander and raised an eyebrow. Xander smiled in return. Both men were wearing what they considered the "travel uniform", black jeans and black tee shirts. Spike kicked off his unlaced Doc Martens and curled his feet under him, tucking himself back into the corner of the seat.

Xander turned and looked out the back window to see the bodyguards getting into two large black SUV's. "We look like a presidential motorcade," he observed.

"Nah," Spike sneered, "we make way more money than that poof."

One SUV pulled out ahead of them, and the other dropped into line behind them. The black vehicles slipped out from under the hotel's portico and into the night. It all ran like a well-oiled machine, and all they had to do was show up. Xander couldn't help but smile.

"You feeling better about going to Sunnydale?" Spike asked.

"I guess I am," Xander replied. "I was just sitting here thinking about how different things are now. We have a lot to be proud of."

"That we do," Spike agreed.

"Did you eat?" Xander asked.

Spike grimaced. "I'll wait 'til we get there."

"Why didn't you go ahead?" Xander asked.

Spike hesitated. "Didn't know where you were," he finally said.

"You don't need me to feed," Xander protested.

Spike turned an appraising eye on his friend. "I'm trying not to scare the guys, right? They're still freaked out about that scene with Ace. If you're in the room they feel better."

"How do you know they feel better if I'm there?" Xander asked.

"I can taste it in their blood - anxiety, fear, calmness, whatever," the vampire replied.

"Oh," Xander said, mildly surprised. "You should have called me, then. I could have come back up to the suite."

"I can wait," Spike said, and pulled a book out of the bag on the floor.

Xander stared at the reading vampire for a moment, then leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Just when he was able to think of Spike as being a self-absorbed prick, he'd come out

with some comment that showed compassion or kindness and screw up Xander's carefully constructed assumption. It was maddening.

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Xander woke to a soft knock on the window by his head. It took him a moment to remember where he was. Oh, yeah - limo, Sunnydale, vampire in his lap. Huh? Vampire in his lap. Yep, there certainly was. Well, not in his lap per se, but there was Spike's blond head, pillowed on his thigh, the vampire's body curled on the seat, dead asleep. Xander snorted at his own mental funny - dead asleep, Hee. He opened the window a crack. It was Ace.

"You want me to go check us in?" the big man asked. Xander nodded and put the window back up. He reached down and gently shook Spike's shoulder. Clear blue eyes blinked open and then slammed back shut instantly.

"Wake up, Spike - we're here." Xander kept his voice low; a just-awakened Spike could be volatile. Or snuggly. Which is what seemed to have come up in the rotation this time.

Cool hands wrapped themselves around Xander's thigh and Spike's face pressed against his leg. "Comfy. Don't wanna get up," was the muzzy reply.

Xander loosened the hands and pulled the vampire upright. Spike fell heavily against his shoulder, and Xander automatically wrapped an arm around his back to steady him. The tousled blond head came to rest on his chest, and Spike made a happy, sleepy noise. Xander couldn't help himself. He bent his head and let the tip of his nose almost touch the nape of Spike's neck. Silently, he inhaled traces fabric softener, shampoo and the unique scent of the vampire himself.

Ace knocked on the window. Xander straightened abruptly and pushed Spike off of his chest before opening the window. Ace slipped him two keycards and withdrew. Xander turned to find a fully awake Spike pulling his boots on. Slipping his feet into his loafers, he opened the door. Ace held it as the two men exited the car, and then followed them into the lobby. The Delta was Sunnydale's newest and most luxurious hotel. Xander took in the Art Deco style and quiet elegance. He glanced over at Spike, who nodded.

Ace led them to the elevator. Xander stopped before boarding the car.

"Send Jack up as soon as you guys are settled, OK?" he said to Ace.

The guard nodded. "You need anything?" he asked politely.

"I'll just raid the mini-bar," he said. "Keep the limo out front - we'll be going to see our friends. Who's on tonight with you?"

"Isha," Ace replied.

"We'll only need one of you, and you'll be able to come back with the car and then pick us up when we're ready to leave." He held up a hand to forestall Ace's protest. "Don't argue - I'll explain on the way. Our bags upstairs?" Ace nodded, and Xander stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the penthouse.

When they reached their floor, they walked to one of the two sets of double doors off the elevator lobby, and Xander swiped one of the key cards. The doors opened to reveal a luxurious living room decorated in navy blue and gold. To one side stood a fully stocked bar that held a fruit basket and a vase of fresh flowers. The windows were all discreetly covered with heavy blackout drapes, and Xander noticed that the entertainment center had one of each of the most popular game consoles, as well as selections of music and movies.

"God, I love Annie," Spike said, taking in all of the special details he knew were her doing.

"Should we give her another raise?" Xander asked.

"Shit, no," Spike said. "If she makes any more money, she'll be able to retire and we'll be fucked."

"Point," Xander conceded. He turned and walked into the bedroom on the right side of the suite. Spike went to the room on the left. As expected, their bags had already been unpacked; their clothes were hanging in the closets, their toiletries placed carefully in the bathrooms. It's good to be the king, Xander thought.

He stripped off his traveling clothes and found a pair of faded blue jeans and a soft, cream-colored tee shirt. He traded his loafers for leather sandals and ran a brush through his hair. He glanced in the mirror and decided to shave quickly. He returned to the main room to find Spike seated at the grand piano in the corner, quietly picking out a melody.

Spike had also changed clothes, and now wore a lightweight grey sweater with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows over his black jeans and Docs. Xander started rummaging in the refrigerator behind the bar, coming up with imported chocolates, cheese and crackers and two beers. He diverted his path to the door when he heard a knock. He opened it to admit Jack. A tall man with dark hair in a braid that fell to his waist, Jack was the smallest of the bodyguards, weighing in at a mere 250 pounds, but Xander

considered him to be the best of them all. Jack's mastery of four different martial arts, including Krav Maga, the official martial art of the Israeli Army, made him the most devastating fighter of their group, except for Spike.

Xander always thought that Jack looked like he was in uniform, even in jeans and a tee shirt. Jack's upright but relaxed bearing and his intense stare intimidated many people. He was fast, tough and hard to get to know, but he and Xander had become friendly over time. Jack was generous with his knowledge, always willing to train with Xander, Spike or the other guards when asked, but he never instigated contact. He walked into the room and nodded to Spike, who rose from the piano bench and walked to the center of the room.

Jack didn't flinch when Spike morphed into game face; he simply held out his arm and looked impassively over the vampire's head. With a glance toward Xander, who was contentedly licking chocolate off his fingers, Spike began to feed carefully. Jack's blood tasted clean and rich. Spike was always surprised by how little of this particular human's emotions he could taste. He didn't know if Jack had some sort of trick for suppressing his feelings, but very little came through. Spike fed quickly, and then pulled away with a nod. Jack returned the nod, smiled briefly at Xander and left.

"He's not much for the pillow talk, huh?" Xander said, after the door had clicked shut. He held a beer out to Spike, who accepted it and drank a third of it in one long gulp.

"Nope. I don't think he likes me very much," Spike said, turning his beer up again and taking a chocolate from Xander's plate.

"He's good at his job," Xander observed, "but if he makes you uncomfortable..."

"Nah. It's fine," Spike said. They both drained their beers, and Xander finished his snack. "You ready?"

"Yeah," Xander said. He opened his cell phone. A moment later, Ace and Isha knocked on the door.

"Ace, I said we only need one of you," Xander protested.

"Isha's going to drive - the driver was tired, so I sent him to bed," Ace explained.

"OK," Xander conceded, and they went down to the front of the hotel. The guards arranged themselves on either side of Xander and Spike and ushered them to the limo. Once seated, Xander called Willow to tell her they were on their way. As he closed the phone, he looked over at Spike, who was looking at him.

"You ready for this, pet?" the vampire asked.

Xander took in a deep breath and released it slowly. "Ready as I'll ever be."

### **Part Nine**

As soon as they stepped out of the car they were mobbed. Spike found himself with one arm full of Dawn and one of Buffy. The witches similarly flanked Xander. He hugged back as hard as he could. Tara skillfully slipped out of the embrace and allowed Willow to attempt to squeeze the life out of her best friend. Xander could hear Willow's hitching sobs in his ear and tried his best to control his emotions. Finally, he was able to break her death grip on his neck and hold her out at arm's length.

"Hi, beautiful," he said in a low voice. He smiled and laughed when she immediately blushed. Xander was amazed. He'd always thought Willow to be a lovely girl, but the years had worked their magic on her, turning her cuteness into a warm, open beauty that took his breath away. Her hair was long, falling down her back in a russet spill, and her green eyes sparkled. Her skin was luminous in the moonlight. In simple jeans and halter top, she didn't look a day over twenty.

"You're looking pretty gorgeous yourself," she growled back, playfully, taking in his longish hair

and casually expensive look. Both of their smiles softened, and he pulled her close again.

"I'm a shitty friend, Wills. Can you forgive me?" he whispered into her ear.

"Done and done," she whispered back. She squeezed him once more, and then released him to Dawn, who had been standing by, waiting with impatient grace.

Xander looked Dawn over, noting her battered leather pants and faded tee shirt that read "Uppity Women Unite" before enfolding the tall girl into his arms and lifting her off her feet in a quick spin that made her squeal. He put her back on her feet. "Dr. Summers, I presume?" he asked.

"Still Dawnie to you, Xander," she said. She disengaged from his hold and stepped back, turning him to face Buffy. Xander felt his eyes start to fill with tears as he looked at her. She was still as petite and blonde as ever, a few extra pounds rounded her figure and smoothed out her angles. She saw the tears and swept him into an embrace, pulling his head down to her shoulder.

"None of that," she soothed. "This is a happy homecoming, sweetie. It's OK."

Xander clutched at her shoulders and fought for control. He looked up from her shoulder and

locked eyes with Spike for a moment. The vampire was standing to the side with Tara, looking straight at Xander. As their gazes locked, Spike tilted his head slightly, and Xander could see the compassion in the startlingly blue eyes. He took a deep breath and pulled away from Buffy.

"I'm so sorry, Buffy," he said in a low, taut voice.

She reached up and wiped a stray tear off of his cheek, then rose up on her tiptoes to kiss the spot where it had been. "We're good, Xan. Forgiven. Forgiven a long time ago, OK?" He nodded and stepped back. The group started moving toward the house.

"Who was the hottie driving?" Dawn asked.

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Inside, Xander was surprised to see that Buffy and Dawn's house had been completely redone. The suburban, middle class décor had been replaced with things more to Buffy's taste; the house was an oasis of rich, natural tones and soft curves. It was stylish, soothing and welcoming.

Dawn and Buffy hurried off to the kitchen to get drinks, while Tara and Willow ushered the men into the living room. Willow joined Spike on the sofa, while Xander and Tara stood near the fireplace. Xander ran his finger along the frames of a row of photographs there, pausing at one of

himself, Buffy and Willow taken during their first year of high school. Pulling his gaze away from the pictures, he turned to Tara.

"You look good, witchy woman," he joked, taking in her nicely rounded figure. She was dressed in cargo pants and a wrap top, her feet bare, her flaxen hair in a long braid. Her face was lightly made up, and she glowed with health and happiness.

"I'm happy," she confided softly. "You and Spike are here, and that makes Willow happy..."

"And a happy Willow makes a happy Tara," Xander concluded for her. They laughed together, and he squeezed her shoulder. They walked over to the couch and joined Willow and Spike. Xander sat between them and Tara seated herself at her lover's feet and leaned back against her. Dawn and Buffy reentered the room, each laden with a tray of drinks and snacks, which they deposited on the table in front of their friends. Dawn plopped down on the floor at Spike's feet, and Buffy seated herself in the wing chair at his elbow, tucking the full skirt of her sundress under her legs.

Xander reached over and grabbed a handful of chips from one of the bowls. "Mmmmmm, salty goodness," he exclaimed. "Good stuff. The way to a man's heart *is* through his stomach, after all."

Spike appropriated a beer and replied, "No it's not. The way to a man's heart is through the fourth and fifth ribs."

Dawn nodded sagely. "He's right, you know. You can trust me, I'm a doctor." She shoved a handful of cheese curls into her mouth and washed them down with her own beer. Xander and Buffy looked at each other over Dawn's head and both rolled their eyes before erupting into giggles.

"OK, is it just me, or does the concept of Dawnie performing surgery on people wig you out too?" he asked.

"Uber-wig," she replied.

Dawn peered up at them. "Don't sweat it guys - I won't actually get to do surgery on live people for several more years."

"So relieved," Xander said, wryly. He turned to Willow suddenly. "Wills - where's Giles?"

She reached over and clasped his hand. "He's at our house. Sia is with him. She's, well, she's one of the apprentice witches in our coven and Tara and I are her kind of, sort of, unofficial foster parents." Willow and Tara exchanged a soft look.

"She was one of my cases," Buffy said, referring to her job as a social worker. "She started showing magical abilities at puberty and her

parents freaked. She wound up at CPS, and I worked it so she could be with Willow and Tara. She's really good with Giles."

"How is the Watcher?" Spike asked.

Willow sighed. "He's still kind of out of it most of the time. We've got people researching, but we haven't figured out how to reverse the backlash yet. It's frustrating. He understands that you guys are here...we think. You can come see him tomorrow."

Spike felt a tug at the leg of his jeans and looked down into Dawn's wide smile. "I have a friend in Indianapolis - she saw your last show. She said you were awesome!"

He smiled down at her. "It was a good show."

"She said you were just wild for the first couple of hours," Dawn continued.

Xander broke into their conversation. "He was coked off his ass."

All of the women turned shocked eyes on Spike, and he glared daggers at Xander.

"Spike!" Dawn exclaimed. "You don't have some sort of rock star drug problem, do you?"

"Vampire, Bit," he said in an exasperated tone. "Can't get addicted." He gave Xander a look that spoke volumes.

Xander smothered a laugh. "It's true - he can party like Robert Downey, Jr. and not even get a mild hangover. It's kind of annoying, actually." He sat back and listened as Buffy and Dawn harangued Spike about the dangers of drugs, hiding a grin behind his hand.

Finally, Spike had had enough. "Shut up!" he roared, shocking the girls into silence. They stared at him, and he looked down, immediately contrite. In a much calmer tone, he said, "Listen - I have been alive for well over a hundred years; I come from a time when people used heroin to treat the common cold. I am well aware of my limitations, which, as a vampire, are quite limited. If I occasionally want to get high, it is my God-given right as a rock star to fucking get high. Besides, Xander keeps an eye on me so I don't get out of hand. At least, he did until now - because I'm going to kill him for feeding me to you bloody pack of wolves tonight!"

Xander couldn't help it - Spike looked so outraged that he just had to burst into laughter. Willow and Tara immediately followed him, whooping loudly. Dawn started giggling, which set Buffy off; soon they were leaning on one another weakly. Xander glanced over at Spike to see a small grin playing about the vampire's lips. Spike tried to suppress it, but lost the battle, finally joining in the hysteria. They all laughed until they cried. As soon as the majority of the

group would regain their composure, someone else would either lose it again or say, "just say no" and set them off one more time.

When they finally wore themselves out, Willow had slid off the sofa into a boneless heap with Tara, Dawn had come to rest with her head in her sister's lap, and Xander was leaning heavily on Spike, who had his arm wrapped around the human's neck in a mock-headlock. Spike released Xander and collapsed into the space Willow had vacated. He squirmed around until he was reclining against the sofa's arm. He bent his legs, and Xander turned so he was propped against the vampire with one arm wrapped around the upraised knees, his head pillowed on his forearm. Willow, Tara and Dawn all sat up against the front of the sofa, and Dawn reached up and pulled Buffy down to them. She settled herself between Xander's spread feet and held her sister's hand. Spike let his arm trail down to rest lightly on Willow's shoulder.

The old friends stayed in this gentle tangle, chatting and laughing quietly for the next hour. They decided that they would all meet the next day at sundown at the Magic Box. The girls were all starting to drift off, so Xander called Ace to come pick them up. He and Spike half-walked, half-carried Willow and Tara to the limo and dumped them in. They each kissed and hugged Buffy and Dawn then took their leave.

"Willow, you have to tell Ace where your house is," Xander cajoled, as the redhead snuggled deeper into her lover's arms.

"Nice car, comfy car," she groaned, trying desperately to fall back asleep.

Xander shook her a little. "Willow. House. Focus. Where is it?"

She cracked one eye open long enough to give Ace the simple direction. As soon as they arrived at the small cottage that was surrounded by lavish plantings, Spike and Xander eased the witches out of the car and walked them to the door. Sleepy hugs and kisses were exchanged, and the women stumbled off to bed. Spike and Xander slipped back into the car.

Turning to peer through the lowered partition, Ace grinned at them. "Those two are the reason you didn't need a bodyguard tonight?" he asked.

Spike looked back at him with a very serious expression. "I know you can't feel it, mate, but power pours off those two. Makes my teeth itch, if you wanna know the truth." He shuddered a little as he sat back.

Ace looked at Xander who nodded in agreement, then turned back to drive them to the hotel.

## Part Ten

The Magic Box had changed, too. The tacky little sign had been replaced by gorgeous gilded script that was repeated across the front windows. The windows and doors were draped in luxurious fabrics and adorned with a variety of dried herbs displayed in tall pots. Prisms, crystals and assorted trinkets twinkled in the rays of the rapidly setting sun that slanted into the shop.

The secondhand furniture had been replaced with an eclectic mix of new and antique pieces that were strewn around in casually diffident little clusters that invited browsing or quiet conversation. The only relic of the past was the round research table, and Xander had immediately crawled under it to find the tiny carving, an intertwined "A" and "X", that he'd put there so long ago. He was running his fingers over it when Dawn stuck her head under the table.

"Whatcha doin'?" she asked.

He held out a hand and pulled her under the table. "Come see," he invited.

She settled next to him and reached up to touch the letters. "I had no idea this was here," she said. "Sweet."

"Blast from the past," he said in a quiet voice. She laced her fingers through his and rested her head on his shoulder.

Out of habit, Xander had awakened in the early afternoon. He went down to the hotel's lavish pool area and soaked in the rays of the California sun for most of the afternoon, acquiring a nice tan and phone numbers from two girls and an older gentleman who admired his Speedo. Upon his return to the suite, Spike's door had still been closed, so Xander had showered and dressed, then walked to the shop.

He'd found Dawn manning the counter, helping out on her break between the end of classes and the beginning of her internship in the fall. While she helped a customer, he prowled the aisles, finally winding up at the old table. A sudden spark of memory had caused him to look for the old carving.

"Do you still miss her?" Dawn asked.

"Not really," he replied. "It's been so long, and it all seems like a dream sometimes. I remember her, though. How sweet she could be, even when she was driving me batty, how she'd get so excited about the oddest little things."

"How come you never told us you guys were engaged?" Dawn asked softly.

Xander jerked in surprise. "How'd you know that?"

"Oh, Spike told me. He said that you dropped a diamond ring into the ocean with her ashes," she explained.

"I didn't realize he'd noticed. I asked her that night - right before we took on Glory," Xander said.

"So, she was happy ...when," her voice broke, recalling all that they had lost that night.

"I think so. Of course, when I asked her, she slapped me. She said I was only asking because the world was going to end and I wouldn't have to go through with it," Xander said.

Dawn laughed, and it was only a little tearful.  
"That's so her."

"I was supposed to ask her again, after." This time it was Xander's voice that broke, and Dawn wrapped her arms around him.

The bells over the door clanged, and a pair of scuffed Doc Martins walked over to the table. A chair was pulled out, and Spike folded himself onto the floor, peering under the table at the

entwined friends. "Are we scraping the gum, or what?" he asked.

"Memory Lane-ing," Xander said, discreetly wiping his eyes. Spike caught the gesture and his mouth tightened into a thin line. The vampire reached under the table, and Dawn allowed herself to be pulled out. She scrambled upright and crossed the room. Spike reached back under the table and pulled out a now dry-eyed Xander, who hopped to his feet gracefully.

"Did you send the car back to the hotel?" he asked the vampire, who came to his feet in a smooth, effortless motion.

"Nah, it's parked 'round back. Figured we'd go over to the birds' house to see the Watcher soon."

Dawn looked up from the register, where she was carefully placing cash in a zippered pouch. "If you'll lock the door, we can go. Buffy's meeting us there." She slipped the pouch into her shoulder bag and breezed toward the back room. "Is the hottie from last night driving?"

Spike and Xander exchanged a look, and Spike walked to the front of the store to engage the door lock. He walked back to Xander, and they crossed the training room to the back door. Dawn was propped against the fender of the limo, chatting with Isha and the driver, Bill. The

driver saw the two men exit the building and moved to open the car door. Dawn skipped back and locked the back door of the store, then slid into the limo beside Spike. Xander got in beside her and let Bill close the door.

Spike leaned forward to relay directions, while Xander opened the car's refrigerator and offered Dawn a drink. She accepted a bottle of juice, and Xander got water for himself and Spike. The vampire took his with a smile and leaned back, closing the partition. Dawn sipped her juice and tried to look nonchalant. A smile played at the corners of her mouth, and she tried to stifle it. Finally, she gave up and let the huge grin split her face. Laughing, she gestured with her juice bottle.

"I can't believe you guys are so blasé about this stuff! Hello? Limo, driver, bodyguard, rock star..." she gestured to each as she named them, then faltered when she got to Xander. Both men turned to look at her expectantly, not letting her off the hook for a second. "And ...really, really hot big brother." She squealed in exactly the same way she had when she was fourteen, and Xander leaned forward to hug her while Spike winced at the assault on his sensitive ears.

"Sorry, Bit," he said, "we're jaded." He leaned back with a look of bored indifference that lasted all of ten seconds.

"He's lying," Xander added, laughing.

"Sometimes we sit back here and laugh our asses off because we're so lucky. One of these days, when you get a break, you'll have to come out on tour with us. Though I don't know if I want to take on the responsibility of keeping both of you out of trouble."

They laughed and joked for the duration of the short trip to Willow and Tara's house. Buffy's car was already in the drive, so they sent Isha and Bill back to the hotel. The door to the cottage opened, and Tara welcomed them inside, inviting Spike by name. The cottage was larger than it looked from the outside, with well-proportioned rooms and high ceilings. It was decorated in a sumptuous, warm style that Xander thought perfectly suited the witches. Tara got them all seated in the living room and went to the kitchen to get drinks.

She returned with tea and sodas and everyone chatted comfortably. At a small noise from the hall, Xander turned. His eyes went wide when he saw Giles standing there, with Buffy and Willow on either side and a tiny, dark haired girl hovering behind him. Giles looked trim and healthy, but that wasn't what stopped Xander.

The older man had a look on his face of open, childlike joy, and Xander couldn't help but think that it was the happiest he'd ever seen the Watcher.

Xander rose to his feet and approached Giles slowly. "Giles? It's me, Xander," he said, holding out a hand. The older man's eyes lit up and he reached forward to clasp the proffered hand.

"Xander. You're Xander," he said, and the accent was right, but the voice had a faraway quality, like he was repeating something he'd been told.

Xander stepped forward and carefully hugged Giles. "Hey, G-Man. How're you feeling?"

Giles patted him absently on the back, and looked over his shoulder into the living room. "Dawn is in there, and Tara. And a vampire, too."

Xander pulled back to look into Giles' face. "It's Spike, you remember Spike, right?"

"Spike," Giles repeated. "Yes, of course, Spike." The Watcher walked slowly forward, and Buffy went with him, throwing Xander a quick, pained smile.

Xander looked at Willow, who had placed her arm around the small girl's shoulders and was holding her close.

"Xander, this is Sia," Willow said, inclining her head toward the girl. Xander held out a hand, and she took it. Instead of shaking it, she simply held it for a moment.

"He is a part of you," Sia said, looking up at Willow.

Willow smiled. "Yes, honey, he is." To Xander she said, "Part of Sia's gift is seeing connections between beings. As soon as she met Tara and me, she could see her own connection to us. Buffy and Dawn and Giles, too. It's kind of neat."

Xander gently pulled his hand away. "Cool, I'm part of the club. It's nice to meet you, Sia." Willow turned the girl toward the living room and gave her a small push. Sia obligingly joined the others.

"He's not getting any better," Willow confided. "The coven has researched everything we can find on magical backlash, even performed a couple of specific rituals that should have ended it. Nothing worked. I'm at a loss, Xander. I - I don't know what else to do."

He pulled her close and patted her back. "We'll figure it out, Willow. I promise. We'll figure it out."

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After dinner, Tara and Sia elected to stay with Giles while the others went back to the Magic Box to research cures. Buffy drove and Spike spent the short ride giving her hell about her ultra-cautious driving. Xander, Dawn and Willow sat in the back and giggled.

They gathered around the research table, and Willow passed out books while Xander set her laptop up and began searching. Several hours passed. Pages turned, comments and questions were exchanged, Willow traded her book to Xander for his seat at the laptop, Dawn moved to one of the overstuffed chairs and promptly fell asleep.

Willow closed the lid of the laptop and leaned down to rest her head on it. "I just can't find anything. It's so frustrating." She banged her head very lightly on the computer.

Xander closed his book and reached over to rub the back of her neck. "Let's take a break, OK?" He pulled his phone out of his pocket and flipped it open, pressing a button. He waited for the call to be answered. "Isha, hey, man! Will you go up to the Starbucks on Eighth and get my usual, Spike's usual, two mochachinos and a caramel mocha - all grande? And whatever you and Bill want, too. Cool, thanks." He closed the phone and looked around the group, taking in Spike's

sly grin and the girls' open-mouthed stares. "It's good to be the king," he mused.

Dawn woke up when Isha entered the store with the drinks, passing them around and making sure that Spike got the Kenyan roast and Xander got the café-au-lait, knowing how pissy the vampire got when he was given coffee with cream content higher than zero percent. Dawn gestured for the bodyguard to sit in the chair across from her, which he did after glancing at Xander and receiving a quick nod. The others stayed at the table and chatted.

"Hey, Wills," Xander said, "What are your parents up to these days?"

"Archaeological dig in China. They've been there for four years already," she replied, shaking her head a little. "They haven't changed. Yours?"

Xander was proud of himself for not flinching at the question. "Dunno," he said, "I haven't spoken to them since I left."

"Oops," Willow said.

He reached out and covered her hand with his own. "It's OK, no big."

Willow turned to Spike, with a bright smile on her face. "How's Dru?"

"Dead. Dusted, whatever," he replied.

"Well, fuck," Willow said.

Xander turned to Spike. "When? You never told me."

The vampire toyed with his empty cup. "'bout three years ago."

"Oh, shit, Spike. Hawaii?"

Spike nodded. As Xander stared at him in horror, he remembered the night that he had felt Drusilla's existence wink out.

He had been onstage when it happened, in the gorgeous outdoor amphitheater located on Maui. The audience thought that Spike falling to his knees and howling was part of the show, and by the time the wild cheering had stopped, he'd managed to get himself back under control. The physical pain had been bad, but the emotional toll was immense.

Spike had roared through the final songs of the set, stormed off the stage and locked himself in the dressing room. He swiftly downed the two bottles of Jack Daniels on the bar, and then swept out. He shouldered past Xander, Annie and the bodyguards and disappeared out the door.

Two hours before dawn, Spike stumbled through the door of their suite and walked unsteadily to the door of Xander's room. Xander met him there. Seating the vampire on the bed, he

walked back to the suite's kitchen and returned with a mug of warmed blood. Spike drank it, and then looked up.

"This is Carl's," he said.

"I had Julie draw some - figured you'd need it. There's more."

Xander refilled the mug twice, and on his last trip back to the bedroom, he brought a pair of Spike's sweatpants. As soon as Spike had finished feeding, Xander took the mug back to the kitchen. Upon his return, he found the vampire huddled in his bed. Xander climbed in and turned off the lights.

"You wanna tell me about it?" he asked gently.

"No," Spike's voice was barely a whisper.

"Are you OK?" Xander said.

"No," Spike whispered again.

Xander slid across the bed, closing the distance between them. He pulled the unresisting vampire back against him and wrapped an arm around his waist, holding him firmly. Neither said a word when Spike began to shake. When the racking sobs finally came, Xander simply tightened his arm and held on.

The false dawn woke Xander. He looked at the lightening sky for a long moment before realizing

what it meant. Slipping quietly out of bed, he closed the curtains. He knew that they had been drawn as usual when he had finally drifted off to sleep holding Spike. Horrified, he stared at the sleeping vampire. Not knowing what else to do, he had gotten back under the covers and gone back to sleep. He had awakened again at midday, lying on his back. Spike was stretched out on his stomach on the other side of the bed, but the vampire's cool hand was resting in his larger one. Xander squeezed Spike's hand gently and got up.

"Oh, shit," Xander repeated softly, remembering. "Jesus, Spike." He shook his head. Spike's eyes pleaded for him to drop it.

"So, I guess that's it for the family talk, huh?" Xander said, looking around the group. Willow looked mortified, Buffy confused, and Dawn was focused on Isha and hadn't even noticed the exchange at the table. He looked back at Spike, who looked uncharacteristically tired. "You ready to call it a night?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think so," the vampire replied. Plans for the next day were briefly discussed, and they locked up the store and left.

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Spike was surprised by a soft knock on his bedroom door. "Come in," he invited.

The door swung open, and Xander stood there, wearing boxers and a tank top, shifting from foot to foot in the shaft of light from the room behind him.

"What's up, Xan?" the vampire asked, placing his book on the bedside table. He shifted up a little higher on his pillows.

Xander took a step into the room and hesitated. Spike patted the bed. "Come on, then," he said.

Xander laughed shortly. "Sorry. This is usually the other way 'round." He climbed into the bed and propped himself up next to Spike. He turned, and looked into crystal blue eyes for a long moment. "I'm sorry about Dru, Spike. I know she meant a lot to you."

Spike held Xander's gaze, then looked away. "I loved her. I wasn't in love with her anymore, but I still loved her. It hurt."

"That night...the curtains," Xander started.

"Yeah, I got up and opened them," Spike admitted. "Thanks for catching that." He gave Xander a rueful half smile. "Not my smartest move."

Xander nodded. "I'm worried about Giles," he said in a small voice.

Spike sighed, and then slid down so that his head rested on the pillows. After a moment, Xander did the same. Spike reached over and turned out the light. When he turned back, Xander had rolled over with his back to the vampire, his body curled into a miserable little ball. Spike gently threaded an arm around the human's waist and held him loosely. "Don't be scared, Xan," he soothed. "We'll figure it out." Xander slowly relaxed against him. Eventually, they slept.

## **Part Eleven**

"Why did you get me a gift? It's not my party," Xander protested, looking at the large rectangular box sitting on his bed.

Spike ran his hand over the box and grinned at his friend. "Actually, it's sort of a bribe."

Xander reached out and untied the white ribbon that held the box shut. He lifted the lid. A large, black case was nestled inside. He lifted it out, and then opened the latches. When he saw what was inside, he whistled in admiration. It was a guitar. But it was no ordinary guitar. It was made of ebony, with mother-of-pearl inlays on

the neck, and it glowed blackly against the red velvet lining of the case. Xander reached out and ran a finger over its neck.

"You got me an Ibanez?" he turned to face the vampire. "You got me the exact Ibanez that I've been drooling over? How did you know? Did Dave tell you?" he demanded.

"I saw you, um, drooling over it in a catalog. Like I said, it's a bribe. You know your idea about me singing for Bit instead of making a speech? I need someone to accompany me," Spike explained.

A frown and a smile warred for dominance on Xander's face, but the smile won. "I only know six songs, Spike," he said.

"Yeah," the vampire replied. "You know the one Dave's had you practicing recently?" Xander nodded. "That's the one," Spike said.

Xander thought for a moment, then his smile widened. "It's perfect."

"The song or the guitar?"

"Both." Xander lifted the instrument reverently from its case and cradled it against his hip. He gently picked out a few notes. It sounded perfect.

"I had Dave tune it before we left," Spike said.

Xander looked up at the vampire, still grinning like a fool. "Thank you, Spike," he said, "I love it."

There was a knock at the door, and Spike waved Xander away when the human started to put the guitar reluctantly to the side. He returned carrying two garment bags. He draped one across Xander's bed and hefted the other over his shoulder.

"I guess it's time to get dressed," he said. Xander nodded absently and continued playing his new guitar softly as Spike walked out of the room.

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Twenty minutes later, Spike went looking for Xander and found him sitting on the corner of his bed, wearing his tuxedo pants and shirt, but no jacket or shoes, softly strumming the guitar. He paused in the doorway and indulged the urge to stare.

Xander's dark head was bent over the black guitar that gleamed against the stark whiteness of his shirt. One tanned hand held the neck of the instrument gently, the curled fingers moving along the neck as the other hand lightly stroked the strings. The lower curve of the guitar's body rested between his thighs, and one long foot tapped a rhythm on the carpet. He came to the

end of the song, and his fingers stopped moving. With his head still bent, Xander rubbed the glass-smooth ebony with the pad of his thumb, and then suddenly looked up.

"You're the coolest, you know that?" he asked Spike softly.

The vampire ducked his head and then smiled. "I'm glad you like the guitar," he said.

"It's really great, Spike, but I was actually referring to your outfit," Xander replied. The vampire grinned and executed a slow turn in the doorway, allowing Xander to admire the custom tuxedo he wore. Never one to follow tradition, Spike's black trousers were fitted rather closely, making his legs look even longer. His feet were covered in supple black boots polished to a high shine. The white shirt hugged his torso and ended in a black-banded collar in lieu of a tie. The cut of his jacket was Edwardian, with a stand-up collar and slightly belled sleeves; it fell to mid-thigh as it settled from Spike's model-perfect spin.

The vampire reached out and took the guitar, placing it reverently into the case. Xander put on his socks and shoes, and then stood to tuck his shirt in. His own tuxedo was non-traditional in that it was a dark, midnight blue. His white shirt had tiny pleats all down the front and was closed with studs set with polished lapis stones. A

slightly larger stone set in silver closed his collar. Spike handed him the matching jacket and Xander shrugged into it, holding his hands out and rocking slightly from side to side.

"You aren't too bad yourself, mate," Spike said, picking up the guitar case and exiting the room. Xander followed. They opened the suite door to find all four bodyguards in the hall, each wearing a traditional black tuxedo.

"Groomsmen or pallbearers?" Xander quipped, as Carl and Isha walked in front of them and Jack and Ace fell in behind, Ace deftly taking the case from the vampire's hand.

"Secret Service; way cooler," Spike rejoined.

Every eye in the lobby was trained on them as they swept out the doors and into the waiting cars.

## **Part Twelve**

Xander leaned against the bar and swirled the chardonnay in his glass, watching the light glint off the pale liquid. He looked out over the room appraisingly. Spike, Buffy and Dawn were in the receiving line with the other three graduates who

were the party's honorees and their parents. Buffy was by far the youngest, and Spike was by far the coolest, so Dawn was glowing happily. Willow and Tara were off seeing to last minute details.

The hotel ballroom was a large rectangle, its lines softened by sumptuous drapes along the walls and subtle lighting. The room had been dotted with large potted trees, each one awash with white fairy lights. The table linens were in jewel tones accented with rich gold, the centerpieces were masses of cream-colored roses and deep green leaves nestled into cut crystal bowls that reflected the pillar candles burning on each table.

At one end of the room stood a small stage with a black grand piano, fronted by an ample dance floor. A DJ was set up off to the side. Classical music played as the first guests arrived and walked through the receiving line. Xander gave up his perch at the bar as the new arrivals streamed in that direction. He found Ace, Carl and Isha standing at the back of the room, each holding a glass of wine and scanning the room warily. Jack was parked discreetly behind Spike in the receiving line.

"At ease, fellas, I think we're safe here," he joked as he approached the bodyguards. They all smiled sheepishly. Xander led them to a table,

intercepting Willow and Tara along the way. After kissing the blonde witch on the forehead, Xander whispered praise for her slinky crimson gown into her ear to make her blush and giggle. Once they were all settled and introduced they started chatting animatedly about current music and movies. After a few minutes, Xander drifted away.

He circled the room, watching and listening. He found himself back at the bar, where he traded in his untouched wine for a beer. He laughed at himself a little when he realized that he'd automatically requested Spike's brand. As he turned from the bar, he almost ran into Willow.

"Hey, Wills. Have I mentioned how gorgeous you look tonight?" He looked her up and down suggestively. Her shining red hair was piled on top of her head, with long tendrils hanging down from her temples. Her gown was a deep amethyst color. It draped from her shoulders to hang in gentle folds to the floor. A slit ran up the side, showing a glimpse of one long leg as she walked. Her shoes were black with tall heels that added a couple of inches to her petite height. At his comment, her green eyes glittered and a delicate blush stained her cheeks.

"You're pretty dashing yourself, Mr. Harris," she replied. He turned back to the bar and ordered her another glass of the red wine she'd been

drinking earlier. She smiled and accepted the drink, linking her arm through his to lead him across the room. Along the way, she introduced him to several people; a couple of Dawn's classmates, one of her professors, and various other guests. She noticed that he gave them each the same smile and direct look, making them feel as if they had his complete attention for the brief time they spent together.

"How do you do that?" she asked, once they were again walking slowly toward the front of the room.

"Do what?" he replied, depositing his empty bottle onto a tray set up to the side. He took her empty glass and disposed of it also.

"Make every person you talk to feel like they're the most important person in the room," she explained.

He laughed, and his eyes twinkled. "I picked it up from Spike. He's the master of it; I am but his lowly apprentice."

As they reached the front of the room, the receiving line began to break up. Buffy and Spike walked toward them, with Jack following in their wake.

"Hi, guys," she said, blowing her bangs off of her forehead. "My face hurts from all the smiling. Poor Spike, all the ladies want to know what he

was thinking when he wrote this song or that song. They were all just crushed when he told them he doesn't write any of them." She was wearing a floor-length black silk sheath that left her arms and shoulders bare. Her long neck was accented with a cameo pinned to a black silk ribbon, and her hair was swept up into a sleek chignon. "When does the dancing start?" she continued. "I have a groove thing just begging to be shaken here."

As if in answer to her query, the classical music turned to louder dance music, and Dawn twirled onto the dance floor with Isha in tow. She was wearing an ice-blue strapless gown with a full ball skirt, and she looked like a fairytale princess. Her long hair was worn in soft curls that tumbled down her back. She had one hand resting lightly on Isha's shoulder, and his loosely clasped her hip as they gyrated. Xander heard Spike let out a very quiet rumbling growl.

"Down, boy," he said, laying a hand on Spike's shoulder. "It's called dancing - all the young people are doing it these days. It's much less like sex than it looks." The girls giggled, and Spike had the good grace to look sheepish.

"Let's go show them how it's done, Slayer," Spike said, twirling Buffy expertly. "Plus I can go scare the piss out of Isha."

Xander grabbed Willow's hand and led her after the departing couple. "Let's go try and save Dawn from the embarrassment, shall we?" He smiled down into her face and swung her into his arms in a smooth move.

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"...and we just couldn't be any prouder of our little girl," the florid woman finished her speech with tears running down her face. Xander clapped politely, while trying to stifle a smile. Spike had been repeating the woman's words in a pitch-perfect imitation of Patsy from "Absolutely Fabulous" in his ear throughout her speech. Xander elbowed the vampire sharply in the ribs as Buffy walked onto the stage and stopped in front of the microphone.

"I know you guys are probably tired of the speeches, our guests of honor most of all. So to them I just wanted to say that we apologize for embarrassing them, and it's almost over - but not quite." She grinned at Dawn, who shot her an exasperated look.

Buffy looked out over the crowd for a moment, and then continued speaking. "Most of you know Dawn, and by extension, me. So you know that our family is a little bit on the unconventional side. Dawn and I lost our Mom a lot of years ago, and we had to build a new family. The members of that family have stuck with us through some

rough times, and Dawn and I are lucky to have had them by our sides for so long.

When Dawn was about fifteen, under extremely trying circumstances, I made a promise to my sister - I promised to show her this world. What I didn't realize at the time was that she was going to be the one to show it to me. She showed me the meaning of love, the meaning of family, and how to do the most important thing in this world - live in it." She wiped a tear from her cheek and smiled brilliantly, catching her sister's eye.

"I love you, Dawnie, and I am so thrilled to stand up here today and see the woman you've become. On behalf of the whole family - myself, Giles, Willow, Tara, Xander, Spike and Sia - we love you and we are in awe of your accomplishments." The crowd applauded, and Dawn blew her sister a kiss.

"I'm going to shut up now, because I'm sure that most of you are much more interested in what Dawn's honorary Dad has to say." She smiled at Spike and Xander, and gestured for the vampire to join her at the microphone. He did, and Xander heard a ripple of whispers run through the crowd. Buffy leaned up and kissed Spike lightly on the cheek then walked to stand next to Xander.

"I spend a fair amount of time behind one of these," the vampire said, gesturing to the

microphone, "but usually I just have to sing and say things like 'Hello, Cleveland!'" There were laughs throughout the crowd, and he ducked his head shyly. "Back in the old days, I made a promise to a lady - that one over there," he gestured toward Buffy. "I promised that I'd take care of Dawn until the end of the world. I'm still at it, and I intend to be for quite some time. And, yeah, that is a warning to anyone intending to date my little girl." He shot Dawn a discreet two-fingered salute when she stuck her tongue out at him.

"That's enough of me talking," he said. "I'm gonna stick to what I do best, if you don't mind." He gestured to Xander, who walked onto the stage with the black guitar in hand. He pulled out the piano bench and sat on the end of it, settling the guitar in his lap. Spike removed the microphone from its stand and walked over to stand beside Xander.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in his public debut, Mr. Xander Harris." The crowd applauded, and Xander could hear his girls cheering. Spike said, "Little Bit, this is for you - better than we could ever say it." He looked down at Xander, who nodded and began to play. After the opening chords, Spike began to sing.

*Lying in my bed I hear the clock tick,  
And think of you*

*Turning in circles  
Confusion is nothing new  
Flashback to warm nights--  
Almost left behind  
Suitcase of memories,  
Time after--*

*Sometimes you picture me--  
I'm walking too far ahead  
You're calling to me, I can't hear  
What you've said--  
And you say--go slow--  
I fall behind--  
The second hand unwinds*

Spike leaned in closer to Xander, careful not to interfere with his playing. He looked out over the crowd and locked eyes with Dawn as he sang the chorus of the song.

*If you're lost you can look--and you will find me  
Time after time  
If you fall I will catch you--I will be waiting  
Time after time  
If you fall I will catch you--I will be waiting  
Time after time*

*Time after time*

Xander played the bridge, and Spike sank down onto the piano bench behind Xander, leaning lightly against the other man as he played.

*After your picture fades and darkness has  
Turned to gray  
Watching through windows--I'm wondering  
If you're OK  
Secrets stolen from deep inside  
The drum beats out of time--*

*If you're lost you can look--and you will find me  
Time after time  
If you fall I will catch you--I will be waiting  
Time after time  
If you fall I will catch you--I will be waiting  
Time after time*

Xander picked out the melody one more time, and Spike rested a hand on his shoulder as he finished the song, repeating the last line.

*Time after time  
Time after time  
Time after time  
Time after... time*

The final note faded, and the small crowd applauded wildly. Dawn ran onto the stage and wrapped her arms around both men. Xander barely got the guitar out of the way in time.

"I love you guys," she said, squeezing them tightly. The dance music started up again, and Spike used his enhanced strength to pull the three of them upright and lead them off the stage. As soon as their feet touched the floor,

they found themselves engulfed by Buffy, Willow and Tara.

"OK, OK, let me breathe," Spike groused, fighting his way out of the tangle of arms. "Stop bloody Scoobying me to death." Trying desperately to get away from the emotional scene, he took Dawn by the hand and led her out onto the dance floor.

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As the evening wore on, the character of the party morphed and changed. Innocuous dance music gave way to what Dawn called "Tunes for Geezers". Spike shocked her to near speechlessness by twirling her around the dance floor in a flawless classical waltz. Xander took her for the next dance, his waltz only slightly less expert, while Spike was systematically besieged by every woman over the age of fifty in the room. The vampire exhausted his ballroom dance repertoire with humor and charm, while the rest of the gang proceeded to get tipsy, watch and periodically join in.

Xander and Buffy danced the most, using their forays around the floor as cover for delivering a series of glasses of Jack Daniels to the vampire, who slugged them down gratefully without missing a step. Finally, Dawn walked over and had a word with the DJ. When the song changed, she strode onto the dance floor and claimed

Spike for the final waltz. Xander and Buffy, Tara and Jack and Willow and Isha followed, laughing.

"You're pretty good at this old-school stuff," Buffy said, smiling up into Xander's face.

"I'm a man of many talents," he grinned.

She pulled him closer. "I remember," she murmured against his chest.

Xander allowed his hands to slide from the traditional waltz positions to curl around her slight body, gliding over her exposed back. Holding Buffy in his arms felt comforting and familiar; he automatically dropped his head to rest one cheek against her temple, breathing in the spicy-sweet scent of her perfume as they swayed together.

Across the dance floor, Dawn whispered into Spike's ear, "This is the last oldie. Are you ready to really dance after this?"

"More than ready," the vampire said tightly, looking over her shoulder. He deftly steered them closer to Xander and Buffy as the song came to a close. The last notes faded as the two couples came side by side, and a throbbing dance beat started. The lights dimmed, and colored spotlights hidden in the rafters began to revolve, bathing the room in streaks of red, blue and green.

Dawn leaned over. "Can I cut in?" she asked. Xander released Buffy with a squeeze and a smile and stepped back. He held an arm out to Dawn, and then barked a short laugh when the two sisters began dancing together, leaving Xander and Spike facing one another. They exchanged a grin and a shrug, and then threw themselves into the dance.

The change in music sent the older couples scurrying to the sidelines, but brought everyone else onto the floor, and Spike and Xander found themselves crushed close in a press of bodies. Both were excellent dancers, feeling the music in their bones and letting their bodies move sinuously with the beat. The people around them shot them admiring glances, and Xander couldn't help the grin that split his face as he watched Spike lose himself in the music.

The vampire really was a joy to watch, all tight pants and loose hips, sex on wheels for sure. He tossed his head, blond hair sparkling, eyes flashing. His face wore his patented evil grin; all lips, no teeth. He moved like a snake - Spike looked every inch the predator when he danced.

Xander moved to the beat, no longer the awkward teen he had been, dancing at The Bronze in high school. Strife, success and age had seasoned him and made him comfortable in his own skin; he exhibited a loose-limbed grace

and sense of abandon that drew admiring stares from all quarters. The sight of the two men dancing together seemed to bring about a shift in the attitude of the room. Over the course of the next few songs, jackets were shed, sleeves were rolled up, collars were loosened, and Spike and Xander each found themselves partnered with a variety of men and women.

Xander worked his way across the floor, arrowing toward one of the bars. He ordered and moved to the side, leaning on a wall to cool down and sip his beer while watching the dancers. He easily picked out Spike's halo of blond waves, and then lost him again in the frenzy. Willow and Tara were dancing together, as were Buffy and Jack. The other bodyguards had no shortage of partners - both Carl and Isha had pretty girls on their arms, and Xander noted with a smile that Ace had a pretty boy on his. Dawn was happily gyrating in a cluster of her classmates, a broad smile on her face.

"She still looks about fourteen to me," Spike said, leaning on the wall next to Xander and taking a sip from his glass of JD. "Then again, sometimes I forget that you're not sixteen or seventeen anymore."

"That's OK," Xander replied, smiling fondly. "Sometimes I forget, too." The music was loud, and it was difficult to talk, so the two men simply

stood quietly, shoulder to shoulder and watched the dancers. They finished their drinks and worked their way back across the floor to join their friends.

*\* Time After Time Cyndi Lauper, et al. The version that inspired me was Matchbox Twenty's.*

### **Part Thirteen**

Xander was standing in Buffy's front yard, under the streetlight. He had one hand on the ornate iron post, the other in his pocket and his face tilted up at the full moon. From his shadowy perch on the back corner of the porch rail, Spike thought he looked otherworldly. The vampire could see his friend clearly as the yellow light poured over the strong profile and glinted off of the silky dark waves that flowed down to brush the shoulders of his shirt. Xander had left his jacket in the car, and the sleeves of his untucked shirt were rolled up to his elbows. His collar and the top two studs were open. He was a tiny bit drunk, and he swayed just a little on his feet as he swung himself around the light post.

Spike watched as Buffy crossed the lawn. When he noticed her, Xander stopped swinging on the lamp post and held his hands out. She placed both of her hands into his, and he lifted them to his mouth, kissing her knuckles. Spike watched

as they whispered quietly, noticing the way Xander inclined his dark head attentively, not releasing Buffy's hands. He bent his elbows to draw her closer, placing her hands on his shoulders. She curved one around his shoulder, the other came up to the back of his neck.

Spike could see Xander's lips move against Buffy's cheek, but couldn't tell what was being said. She pulled back a little and looked up into his eyes. With a small nod, she tilted her head, eyes slipping languidly shut. Xander wrapped an arm around her slim waist and let his hand splay on her hip. The fingers of the other hand caressed her back. Their lips touched lightly, almost playfully, and then Spike saw Xander take possession of Buffy's mouth, opening her lips with his own and sliding his tongue inside. The vampire turned and walked slowly into the house.

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"Told you so," Xander said, as they broke apart. They each took a small step back. "Just like kissing my sister. Huh."

"Me, too," Buffy said, absently touching two fingers to her mouth. "Weird."

"Yeah," he replied. "The dancing felt right, and holding you in my arms was good, but the kissing..."

"Kinda wrong?" she supplied.

"Very wrong," he said.

"Friends?"

"Looks like." He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and they turned to walk back to the house.

"Cool," she said. "In that case, I feel no obligation to stay up any later entertaining you. I'm beat, I'm going to bed."

Xander pressed his lips to her temple. "Sleep tight. Love you." "You, too," she said, slipping into the house.

Xander stood on the porch for a moment with his hands in his pockets, smiling. He jumped when the door flew open and Spike stepped out.

"Cell phone," the vampire said shortly, holding out his hand.

Xander handed it over. "Who are you calling?"

"Bill. Thought I'd go back to the hotel - you can call him back when you're ready."

"Why are you leaving?" Xander asked. It wasn't like Spike to flake out before dawn, and that was still two hours away.

"Figured you and Buffy would want some privacy," Spike said, looking down at the phone.

"Spike, Dawn and Willow and Tara are staying here tonight and what would Buffy and I need privacy for?"

The vampire wouldn't meet his eyes. "Oh, I get it," Xander said with a chuckle. "You were watching us and you think we're gonna go upstairs and get it on with a houseful of guests, right? Thanks for giving me so much credit for classiness."

Spike looked up then, and Xander's smile dropped from his lips. Spike looked hurt. His eyes looked soft and vulnerable, and he looked like he was waiting for someone to hit him again. Suddenly, Xander understood.

"Oh, Spike - no. That's not it at all. Buffy and I were just figuring something out." The vampire tried to look down, and Xander reached out to catch his sharp chin with the fingers of one hand, tilting his head up so their eyes could meet.

"Earlier tonight, she and I started feeling comfortable together. We didn't know if it was our friendship coming back or the... other. So we kissed, to see if there was anything there." He stopped talking then, because the look in Spike's eyes literally stole his voice.

"And?" Spike said, his voice husky. "Was there? Anything there?"

Xander smiled gently. "Yeah - friendship. Nothing else."

They stood in silence, looking into one another's eyes. "That's good," Spike said slowly, "That you're friends again."

"Uh huh," Xander replied, and he couldn't stop looking from the vampire's eyes to his lips and back again. Spike's eyes mirrored the motion, slipping from Xander's bright brown eyes to his mouth and back. Xander's fingers were still holding his chin lightly, and the points of contact burned with the human's body heat. Xander blinked lazily, and then very carefully and very deliberately slid his fingers back along Spike's face until they curved around his jawbone, pressing lightly into the hollow.

The door opened behind Spike, and Dawn stood there in a pair of pajama pants and a tank top, barefoot, with her hair in a ponytail. "Come on," she said. "Buffy and Tara both crashed, but Willow and I want to spend some time with you guys, OK?"

Xander didn't look away from Spike's eyes and didn't drop his hand. "We'll be right there, Dawnie," he said. She shut the door softly.

Xander tightened his fingers against Spike's skin for a second, and then let the touch fall away.

"We're talking about this later," he said.

Spike leaned forward and touched his lips to Xander's with no pressure; just close enough that the other man could feel them move when he spoke. "Yes, we are, pet. Count on it." And then the touch was gone, and Xander shivered at the loss as he followed the vampire inside.

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Willow was on the sofa, dressed much the same as Dawn, with her hair falling loose around her face. When the two men walked in the door, she gave them a big smile.

"Kick off your shoes and get comfy. Dawnie went to get drinks and stuff," she said.

Xander toed off his loafers and leaped on top of her, catching his weight on his hands and growling playfully into her neck, making her laugh out loud. Spike sat in the armchair to wrestle his boots off and smiled fondly at their antics. Dawn came back into the room with a tray, which she set carefully onto the table. It held two bottles of tequila, a bowl of lime wedges, a saltshaker and four shot glasses. She looked from Spike to Xander and then over to Willow. "Now," she said, her lip curling into an evil smile, "we're ready to talk."

Thirty minutes later, the girls had each had three shots, Xander four and Spike nine. The first bottle was empty, and the second was going fast. The vampire set the glasses up again and licked the back of his hand, sprinkling salt onto it before he slid the shaker across the table to Dawn. They were all seated on the floor, men on one side of the table, women on the other. Xander leaned down and licked the salt off Spike's hand before expertly tipping a shot into his mouth and then biting into a lime wedge. The girls tossed down their own shots, and Spike took the opportunity to place his hand on Xander's thigh under the table and squeeze the firm, warm muscle. He was gratified when the human shifted under his hand and angled himself a little closer.

Dawn bit her lime and made a face. "Blurgh!" she exclaimed, slamming the shot glass onto the table, grimacing when Willow shushed her. "OK, let's talk about sex."

Xander goggled at her. "I'm thinking 'wildly inappropriate' here," he said.

"Bullshit," she replied.

"OK, then," he said, reasonably, "what did you want to know?"

She smiled. "I wanna know if you're bi."

Xander's mouth fell open, and he looked shocked. The look fell off of his face almost immediately, and he grinned. "Yeah - I'm bi. Have been for a long time, though I'm sort of..."

"Cherry?" Spike helpfully supplied.

Xander turned to face the vampire. "I think 'inexperienced' may be a better word. I've just played on the straight side of the fence a lot more, is all."

"Cherry," Spike repeated.

"Don't make fun of me, fang-face. It's not my fault you vamps will fuck anything." Xander really thought that he'd be better able to look angry if Spike weren't so damn cute.

"Almost anything, pet," Spike said, looking mildly affronted. "It's a fine distinction, but a distinction nonetheless. There are at least a dozen species of demon I wouldn't fuck with your dick."

"Well, that's all of us then. The bi brigade, even," Willow laughed. She laughed harder when Spike and Xander both turned to stare at Dawn.

"Hello, modern woman - all about exploring my options," she said, tossing her ponytail over her shoulder.

Xander looked at Spike, who simply shook his head and gestured toward the tequila. Xander

thought about it for a second, and then declined with a shake of his head.

"I have a question," Dawn said.

"Swallow," Xander replied. Spike spit tequila all over the table.

"That's not the question, but it's close," Dawn explained. "I wanna know who gives better blow jobs - girls or boys."

The two men looked at one another. "Boys," they answered together. Both women looked at them with narrowed eyes.

Spike held up a conciliatory hand. "Look here - who does better by you - blokes or birds? Birds, right? A girl knows how to touch you, she knows all the little secret spots and where to go soft and where to go rough, yeah? Cause she's running the same equipment, so to speak. Same with us."

Willow and Dawn considered his comment for a moment, and then both nodded.

"I get that," Willow said.

"How often?" Xander quipped, raising an eyebrow at her.

"More often than you, Cherry," she replied. Xander grabbed her foot and tickled it

mercilessly until she managed to crawl out of his reach.

They settled back into their places, and Dawn poured another round of shots. Xander picked Spike's hand up and licked the palm before sprinkling salt into it. He did his shot nonchalantly, making sure to thoroughly lick the salt from the vampire's hand before tossing his tequila back.

"OK, I've got another question," Dawn said. She frowned when both men groaned theatrically.

"What's your Bulletproof Kink?"

Willow raised her hand. "I don't think I have any kinks, Dawnie. Vanilla Lesbian here."

Dawn smiled at her. "Not 'tie me up, tie me down' kink - I mean, what's the one thing that'll get you hot no matter what? The thing that always works." She sat up and held one arm out. "Me, for example, I've got this spot, right inside my elbow. Somebody sucks on that spot, and I'm a goner." She shivered dramatically.

"Oh, I get it," Willow said. "Mine's hair-pulling." She sat back against the sofa, pleased with herself. "What?" she asked, noticing that both men were staring at her. "Not like 'drag me to your cave' hair pulling," she explained, "just a gentle tug, exactly the right way. Tara's the only one who can do it, anyway."

Spike leaned across Xander and tangled one hand into the back of Willow's hair, curling his fingers at the roots and tugging. Her eyes immediately closed and a soft moan fell from her lips. The vampire released her and sat back up. Her eyes flew open. "How the... what the..." she spluttered.

Spike looked at her knowingly. "Over a hundred years experience, Red. There's not much I don't know how to do right." He reached over and picked up Xander's hand. He dipped the human's thumb into his shot glass of tequila, salted it, sucked the salt off, and then threw back the liquor. Forgoing the lime, he grinned his evil grin at Willow. Xander sat, dumbstruck.

"Whoa," Dawn said.

"See your 'whoa' and raise you a 'guh'," Xander added.

"OK, Spike," Dawn said, "what's yours?"

He looked at her and laid two fingers against the side of his neck, where the pulse would be if he had one. "I'm easy, Bit - vampire, neck, biting."

"Makes sense," Willow agreed. "What about you, Xan?" she asked.

Xander grinned. "I like talking."

"You or the other person?" Dawn queried.

Xander chuckled. "Has to be the other person; I tend to go all non-verbal," he said.

"What do you like them to say? Dirty stuff?" Dawn asked, and Xander tried not to notice that Spike was listening intently.

"Not necessarily dirty," Xander explained, "I just like to hear ... stuff."

"Xander likes the talky sex," Willow singsonged. He nodded.

"Oh, crap," Dawn said. "It's almost five."

"Yeah," Spike said. "Sun's up in less than an hour."

Xander pulled his phone out of his pocket and called Bill while the girls gathered up the shot glasses, lime peels and empty bottles. Xander closed the phone and sat on the couch to put his shoes on.

While Willow and Spike carried the tray into the kitchen, Dawn came to sit by Xander. She gave him a kiss on the cheek, and accepted one in return.

"Thank you for the party," she said. "I love you. Now go back to the hotel, and if you don't fuck him, I will."

She kissed him again, and then trotted up the stairs, leaving him open-mouthed in her wake.

## Part Fourteen

They didn't talk in the car. They sat side by side and looked straight ahead, and Xander hoped that Spike couldn't tell that he was shaking slightly.

Spike could tell.

They arrived at the hotel, and Bill opened the car door. They dismissed the driver, walked into the hotel and took the elevator to the penthouse. Xander swiped the keycard and opened the door, gesturing for Spike to precede him into the room. He shut and bolted the door, making sure that the "Do Not Disturb" sign was hanging from the knob. When he turned from the door, Spike was standing by the bar, looking at him and Xander caught his breath audibly.

The vampire's eyes were shining, but his expression was serious. Xander walked to him and stopped a foot away. Spike smiled gently, but didn't move.

Xander raised one hand and brushed it lightly over Spike's prominent cheekbone.

"Spike...could you..." he stammered, and suddenly they were in each other's arms. Xander

found that his memory was correct - the vampire's soft curls fit neatly in the crook of his neck as strong arms wrapped themselves around his waist. He ducked his head until his nose touched the top of Spike's head and inhaled and exhaled deeply for a moment. He could feel the brush of Spike's lashes as he blinked against his neck, then he felt a cool dampness as a gentle kiss was pressed there.

Xander tightened his arms and held Spike's smaller frame against his chest. He crushed their bodies together for a long moment, and then relaxed his hold a little. Spike turned his face up and tilted his head invitingly. Xander canted his head the slightest fraction to the side and they were kissing. The vampire's lips were as cool as the human's were hot, and the contrast made them both shiver. Spike insinuated a hand between them and brought his fingers up to cup Xander's cheek.

Their mouths slid gently together, each getting a feel for the other before deepening the contact. Xander let the tip of his tongue trace invitingly against Spike's lower lip, and he sighed when the vampire answered it with the touch of his own cool tongue and a soft groan. Xander brought one hand up to the back of Spike's neck and deepened the kiss further. Xander had a secret, and Spike was just finding it out: Xander was a phenomenal kisser. From closet time with

Cordelia Chase to a few carefully chosen one-night stands, Xander's kissing prowess had been appreciated by all along the way.

Xander broke the kiss so he could catch his breath. He pulled back and looked into Spike's hazy, slightly shocked blue eyes.

The vampire blinked slowly. "Christ, Xan. I'm an idiot," he breathed.

Xander smiled and tilted his head questioningly.

"I should have kissed you a long time ago, pet," he continued, "I never would have stopped." He leaned forward and kissed Xander again, slowly and thoroughly. When they broke apart again, they were both panting.

Xander laid his head onto Spike's shoulder. "Why didn't you?" he asked.

Spike mirrored the motion, laying his head on Xander's shoulder, turning so his lips brushed the human's warm neck as he spoke. "Was bloody scared to. I haven't had a whole lot of friends, and I didn't want to make things awkward between us."

Xander put his hands on Spike's shoulders and pushed him out to arm's length. "So, you didn't think the occasional stoned leg-humping was awkward?" he laughed.

The vampire ducked his head and shrugged.  
"Dutch courage, pet, or in this case, Bolivian or Chinese. Was the only time I was ballsy enough - and it still didn't work out. You always took care of me, but you never reacted at all."

Xander raised one hand to tip Spike's face up. "I couldn't. I wanted you, but not that way, Spike. I didn't want to think you could only want me if you were...altered. It hurt too much."

"Jesus, love," Spike groaned, dropping his eyes.  
"I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you like that. As usual, I didn't think."

"Spike," Xander's voice was soft, and the vampire looked up into shining brown eyes.  
"Maybe you can find a way to make it up to me."

Spike's lips curled up into a grin. "Yes, Xan, I think maybe I can make it up to you. Why don't we explore that idea a little bit, yeah?" He reached up and undid a stud on Xander's shirt, sliding the backs of his fingers against the exposed skin in a small circle before moving on to the next stud. He could hear Xander's heartbeat speed up, could see his pulse thudding faster in his neck. He used his hands to spread the sides of Xander's shirt and leaned forward to press a kiss just below the hollow of one collarbone. He moved his lips up and traced the arch of bone with his tongue. Xander shuddered.

Spike continued opening the studs until the shirt hung open, then eased it from Xander's shoulders, all the while moving from one collarbone to the other, kissing and licking delicately. Xander toed off his loafers and socks, and Spike broke away to pull off his own footwear. He started to unfasten the studs of his own shirt, and Xander was instantly by his side, taking over with shaking hands. Spike placed his hands on Xander's shoulders and leaned in to whisper in the other man's ear.

"I've got an idea, pet," he said. "I think I know how to make it up to you." He chuckled, and the low sound sent shivers up Xander's spine. "I'm going to work on that - what did Dawn call it - that bulletproof kink of yours." The vampire's shirt slipped off his shoulders and down to the floor. Spike brought his hands to Xander's waist and unbuckled his belt. His lips were still brushing the shell of the human's ear, and he continued speaking in a low growl as he unbuttoned and unzipped the tuxedo trousers, letting them fall to the floor.

"I want you, Xander. I want to touch you and kiss you. I want every inch of you." Spike pushed against Xander's shoulder, and the taller man stepped out of the puddled trousers and backward. They moved in tandem across the room and through the door of Xander's bedroom, which was illuminated only by the bedside lamp.

They continued walking until the backs of Xander's knees touched the edge of the bed. Another gentle shove and Xander was sprawled at full length on the bed, wearing nothing but his black silk boxer shorts. He tucked his hands behind his head and canted his hips up slightly, causing the thin material to cling to the length of his erection, outlining it. Spike hissed at the sight and leaned down to run a finger lightly down the silk-covered bulge. Xander shifted toward the touch and whimpered slightly when it was withdrawn.

Spike brought his hands to his own belt, unbuckling it and sliding it slowly through the loops before dropping it on the floor. He considered removing his trousers, but decided that having the barrier between his sensitized flesh and Xander's heat was a good idea for the moment. He moved over to the bed and carefully lowered his body to press full-length against the other man.

"Hello, love," he whispered.

"Hi," Xander replied, smiling breathlessly.

"You feel so good," Spike said. He balanced his weight on his hands and allowed his lower body to brush enticingly against Xander's. Tanned arms came up to wrap around slim hips and increase the contact. Spike allowed it for a

moment, thrusting his erection against Xander's before pulling back.

"Don't be in such a hurry. We have all the time in the world. I need you to tell me a few things, pet." Spike's blue eyes looked into Xander's brown ones, and he smiled. "How close to the mark was I with the 'Cherry' comment, Xan?" He laughed softly when Xander flushed. "'s alright, pet - I just want to know where we stand, is all. Don't go getting freaked out."

Xander smiled sheepishly. "Pretty close, actually. I, um, I've only ever been..." He trailed off in embarrassment.

"Always been the top? Figured as much; it's a good place to start. Don't worry, you'll get your turn." He laughed again when Xander's eyes began to smolder and his heart rate jumped another notch. "I want you on me, love, in me, breaking me open, owning me. I want all that heat and hardness splitting me, fucking me, crushing me. But you are gonna bottom for me, Xan. I'll have you under me, all hot and wet and open. I swear you'll beg for it, you'll want it so bad. I'm gonna hold you down, tear you apart, turn you inside out. Want to be in you - tongue and fingers, cock and fangs. I want everything."

Xander's hands were opening and closing convulsively on Spike's hips, but he made no move to wrest control from the vampire. He was

enjoying himself too much. Spike's low voice was rolling through him, making his bones resonate with the dark hum of his words. He was so hard his cock was dripping, soaking the silk of his boxers, the hot fluid painting his belly.

"I want everything," Spike repeated, making sure that Xander was looking him in the eye. "I've spent too many years gettin' it halfway. I know you, Xander, and you know me. You know what I am, what I can do, what I can give you if you'll let me. I'm not going to apologize for my nature." He nuzzled Xander's neck, allowing his game face to come forward and scraping lightly along the human's jugular with a fang. Xander bucked, and Spike could smell the burst of pheromones that wafted up from his hot skin. The heady fragrance of lust swirled around his enhanced senses.

He shook off his demon visage and kissed Xander roughly, thrusting their bodies together for a moment before pulling back again. Xander groaned his frustration. "I know you're close, love, I can smell it. I can smell your come, building up, so ready to go. You just need a little bit more, don't you? Just a touch, just my hand on you, my mouth on you." Xander trembled harder with each word. Spike drew his tongue up the side of his neck and swirled the tip against the curve of his ear, then moved in for the kill.

"We're going to do everything, love - everything you've ever wanted. We've got days and days to spend together, and I'm going to spend them learning you inside and out. I want to feel you around me, hot and tight. God, I can't wait to come inside you, can't wait to hear you beg me to fuck you." Xander's breath was coming in gasps, and Spike could smell how close he was to orgasm. "Gonna fuck you, Xan, gonna make you scream." It was too much; Xander pulled Spike's hips down to his and rubbed against him roughly once, then twice before his body stiffened and he came, crying out harshly.

Spike stared into Xander's face, watching the expression of pained ecstasy that swept over his features. His own orgasm rushed through him, taking him by surprise, and he gasped and shuddered before collapsing onto the warm body below him. Xander brought his hands up to cradle Spike's head, carding his fingers through the blond waves before raising his head to kiss the vampire slowly.

Xander pulled back and smiled. "I can't believe you just talked me off," he laughed. He trailed his hands down Spike's sides, moving one between them, questing.

Spike laughed shortly and stopped him with a hand on his wrist. "No need, pet. I came when you did. The look on your face..."

Xander leaned up and captured Spike's lips in a gentle kiss. It was one of those post-orgasm kisses - soft and deep and exciting without being urgent; a perfect coda to the roller coaster ride of the night that preceded it. The kiss faded away, lips moving to brush against the hard planes of cheeks and over chins and eyebrows and cheekbones and jaws, accompanied by soft sighs and small noises of satisfaction.

Finally, the vampire rolled them to their sides, and then stood to strip off his damp trousers. Xander wiggled out of his boxers and Spike appropriated them to clean them both up. He balled up the soiled garment and tossed it away. Xander shrugged his way under the blankets and held them up for Spike. The vampire settled against his chest, half-lying on top of him as he reached over and turned out the light.

Xander pressed a kiss to the top of Spike's head, and then sighed happily. Spike felt the vibration as Xander started to giggle. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"Wordgasm," Xander said, and they laughed together until sleep claimed them.

## Part Fifteen

Xander awoke with his arms around Spike, his nose buried in the nape of the vampire's neck, and his morning erection pressed between the firm globes of his ass. His first impulse was blind panic. Mercifully, that passed in an instant, and he gave in to his second impulse - gently kissing the back of the vampire's neck while pushing his entire body strongly against the lean, cool back. Spike shifted backward, increasing the contact, and Xander let his hand wander down the contours of his chiseled abdomen to brush against his erection.

Spike groaned as Xander began stroking him while at the same time thrusting against him. They picked up a slow rhythm, Spike pushing forward into Xander's tight grip and back against his steely hardness. Xander licked, sucked and bit Spike's sensitive neck the whole time, causing the vampire to arch his head back and keen with pleasure while his hands fisted helplessly in the sheets.

"Gonna come, Xan," Spike groaned. "Oh, God, I want to taste you."

Xander slipped his other hand between Spike's neck and the pillow, bringing his wrist to the vampire's mouth. Spike cradled the proffered arm gently in his fingers and licked at the spot

where wrist and hand met, tracing the fine veins there with the tip of his cool tongue.

"You sure?" he asked.

"Uh huh. Bite me," Xander grunted in his ear and stroked his cock even faster in the friction-warmed cleft. Spike morphed into game face and very gently sank his fangs into Xander. The human jerked momentarily at the sharp pain, then gasped audibly at the pleasure that suffused his body, radiating out from the two points where Spike's fangs pressed inside him. Xander bucked hard against Spike's body and climaxed, shooting hot jets of come between them. Spike sucked one more time and spilled his own release over Xander's hand.

While they both calmed down, Spike continued to run his tongue over the marks from his fangs, licking them long after they'd closed. Finally, after wiping his hand on the sheet, Xander drew his arm back and leaned up to prop himself on his elbow. He rested his other hand on the curve of Spike's waist, rubbing the indentation there with the tips of his fingers.

"Good morning," he said.

"Mornin', pet," the sated vampire replied.

"Breakfast?"

"Shower," Xander said, noting how sticky his chest and belly were.

"You get in the shower," Spike said, "I'll order."

Xander kissed him one last time on the neck and wandered off to the bathroom.

By the time the food arrived, they were both clean and dressed, and if the waiter thought having waffles at 6:00 pm was strange, he didn't say so. Halfway through their meal, Spike jumped up and went into Xander's bathroom, coming back with a small bottle in his hand.

"Here," he said, tossing it to Xander, who looked at him questioningly. "For your headache."

"Thanks. How did you know I have a headache?" Xander asked.

"Could taste it in your blood - silly mortals and your hangovers," Spike scoffed.

Xander washed down a couple of the painkillers with his juice and went back to eating his waffles. He had the fork halfway to his mouth when he dropped it onto the plate with a clatter. Spike raised an eyebrow at him.

"We're dumb," Xander exclaimed.

---

Shortly after sunset, Spike and Xander came hurtling into the Magic Box, hand in hand. As soon as Dawn saw them, she began to squeal.

"You did, didn't you?" she asked.

Spike looked at her and grinned. "Yeah, Bit. We did." She ran over and hugged him.

Xander looked fondly at the two of them. "God, you're like a couple of teenage girls," he said, laughing when they both stuck their tongues out at him. "Where's Willow?"

"Right here," the redheaded witch said, popping her head out of the office. "What's up?"

Xander grabbed Spike and dragged the vampire, with Dawn attached to his other hand, into Willow's office. "We know how to find out what's wrong with Giles." He had to laugh at the completely nonplussed look on her face.

"How? What? How?" she spluttered.

"Three excellent questions," he rejoined, and then laughed out loud again when the petite girl launched herself into his arms.

They broke apart and she looked up into his face, beaming. "What? How? Tell me, tell me!"

"Vampires can taste emotions and pain and stuff - Spike should be able to tell what's up with Giles if he tastes his blood," Xander explained.

Dawn clapped her hands excitedly. "Let's run by Buffy's - I'll get my bag. Then we can go to Willow and Tara's and I can draw some blood so

Spike can taste it! Let's go!" She turned and ran out to the main part of the shop to lock up. Willow turned to gather her things from her desk and missed the significant look that passed between Spike and Xander. When she turned back around, she didn't miss their clasped hands.

"When? What? How?" she spluttered again, pointing at their linked fingers. "Xander, when I asked you said nothing was going on!"

"When you asked, there wasn't," he told her, ducking his head a little. "It's new. Like, last night new."

Willow enfolded both men in her arms, pulling their heads close to hers on either side. "If one of you hurts the other, I will say seven words that will make your man parts shrivel up and drop off, and I don't mean that figuratively," she threatened.

Xander swallowed audibly. "Upgraded the shovel talk, I see," he said weakly.

"Gotta change with the times," she said, shrugging. She turned and went after Dawn.

Spike looked at Xander. "She scares the unliving fuck out of me sometimes," he said.

"No shit," Xander replied. They looked at each other for a second, and then Xander leaned in to kiss Spike gently. The kiss was starting to

intensify when Dawn cleared her throat from the doorway.

"As panty-dampening as that is," she said, "we've got a Watcher to cure." She turned and left the room again.

"Panty-dampening?" Xander mouthed at Spike, who shrugged and led him out.

---

Giles was happy to have blood drawn, though Spike posited that in his current state the Watcher would have been happy to strip down, paint himself lavender and join a pride parade. Dawn expertly applied a tourniquet, found a likely vein and deftly drew a large syringe full of blood, which she squirted into a small cup and handed to Spike, who tasted it, and immediately spit it back into the cup.

"Beer me," he demanded. "That was awful." Tara hopped up and went to rummage in the witches' refrigerator for a beer for Spike.

"So, what's wrong with him?" Xander asked the disgusted vampire.

"He's been poisoned," Spike replied, taking the beer from Tara with a grateful look and slugging back half of it.

The others all started talking at once, and all Spike heard was a cacophony of voices. He waited until they fell silent to speak.

"I don't know exactly what. The blood loses its potency if it's not still in the person, and it's hard to get a read on exactly what's going on. I can tell you one thing, though - Watcher's happy as a lark. Whatever it is must have some sort of euphoric effect." Spike looked over at Giles, who beamed back.

"Well, I'm glad he's happy," Willow said, frowning. "But we really need to fix him."

"Spike could just bite him," Xander said, then slapped a hand over his mouth.

"Spike could what?" Buffy asked, standing in the doorway with Sia behind her.

Xander looked at Spike. "Oops?"

---

"A little over six years ago." Xander's pronouncement was met with bleak silence and blank stares.

"OK," Buffy said carefully. "That answers the when; what about the how?"

"Brain surgery, Cedars Sinai," Spike said. The blank stares were back. Spike glanced over at

Xander. "This might be fun if it wasn't so freaky," he said quietly.

"You had brain surgery?" Willow asked.

Spike nodded.

"How did you do that?" she said.

"Money talks. The more money, the louder it talks. Turns out almost everyone can be bought," Xander explained.

"So, you didn't need me to get you blood because..." Willow continued, glancing to the side to make sure that Sia and Giles had gone to the back of the house as requested.

"Because I can get it myself," Spike said.

"You don't drink out of bags anymore, do you, Spike?" Buffy's voice was toneless.

"No, Slayer, I don't." Spike looked at her unwaveringly. She continued to stare at the hands clasped in her lap.

She looked up and met his eyes. "But, you don't kill people." It was a statement, not a question.

Xander watched as Spike's mouth dropped open in surprise, and then smiled a little as the vampire caught himself and turned the expression into a sly grin. "And what makes you think that?" he purred silkily.

"I just don't think you would. Besides, I don't think Xander would let you." Her voice was confident, and she gave first Spike and then Xander a penetrating look.

"You're not wrong," the vampire conceded.

"So, where do you get your blood?" Buffy asked.

"The bodyguards," Dawn said, and the others all turned to look at her. "What?" she asked.

"Haven't you seen them eat? Those guys are red meat fiends. They each ate half a cow at the party."

"They...let you..." Tara stammered a little as she spoke.

"It's part of their job, Tara. They're probably the highest-paid bodyguards on Earth. We recruit them specially - we screen them very carefully; have to make sure they're healthy, no addictive personality traits, stuff like that," Xander took her hand as he spoke, and she clutched his strongly as she absorbed the information.

"So they know Spike's a vamp," Buffy said.

"It's hard to miss when I'm feeding off of them," Spike said gently.

"So, where do you get them?" Willow asked.

"Cleveland, mostly," Xander said.

The others nodded, acknowledging the sense of recruiting people in the know, supernaturally speaking, from the site of the currently most active Hellmouth.

"I think you're missing the point here," Dawn said, looking at Spike.

He raised an eyebrow at her and waited.

"You're telling me that you know a neurosurgeon at Cedars, and you didn't use that connection to get me an internship there? You suck."

### **Part Sixteen**

"OK," Spike said, grimacing. "Let's do this." He held Giles' wrist and bowed his head, biting as gently as he could. He took a small mouthful of blood and pulled away. He picked his beer up and drained it.

"Miskogen demon musk and alefin weed," he pronounced. "Bit, will you get me another beer? Watcher's blood tastes like shit."

Tara gently bandaged Giles' wrist while he beamed at her and patted her shoulder with his

free hand. Dawn hopped up and returned quickly with the beer.

"Thanks," Spike said. "OK, Miskogen musk is a good, all-around confusion poison - it just makes the victim docile and hazy. Alefin is sort of a natural narcotic. Both of 'em are one-shot deals; the effects last until the antidote is given."

"How do you know that?" Xander asked.

"Dru and Darla liked to mess around with that sort of stuff in the old days. They poisoned a city well with Miskogen musk, and then ate all the people while they wandered around like idiots. I couldn't stand the taste, myself." Spike shook his head at the memory.

"What are the antidotes?" Dawn asked.

"Hell if I know," Spike said.

Willow piped up. "Yay, research!" At the looks from the others she added, "OK, so I'm still a nerd, deal."

Xander looked at Spike, and noticed that Sia was edging nervously toward the vampire. He slid onto the sofa next to Spike and held a hand out to the girl.

"Hey, Sia," he said. "Did you want to ask Spike something?"

She took his hand in one of hers, and then reached for one of Spike's. Holding both of their hands, she smiled.

"Cool," she said.

"What's cool?" Spike asked

"You belong," she told him gravely, looking from one man to the other and back again.

"Who do we belong to?" Xander asked.

She brought their hands together and waited until they linked fingers before she withdrew her hands. "Each other. Us," she replied. Turning, she resumed her customary place at Giles' side.

"Freaky kid," Spike said, "I like her."

---

Back at the Magic Box, Willow and Tara hit the books, researching the antidotes for the two poisons. Buffy and Dawn pitched in to help with the mundane tasks of shopkeeping, stocking shelves and inventorying supplies. Spike and Xander removed themselves to the "Danger Room" to spar.

"Nice work with the poison identification," Xander said, as he stripped off his faded blue oxford. He draped it over the weapons rack and kicked off his shoes and socks, leaving him clad in old jeans and a white tee shirt.

"Thanks." Spike shrugged out of his sweater, and then toed off his boots. He bent to remove his socks, and Xander pushed one of his shoulders hard enough to make him go down in a heap. The human tried to dance out of the way, but was snared by one ankle and pulled to the floor.

Xander ceased struggling when Spike crawled up his body, hemming him in with hands planted on the mat on either side of his head.

"You're bad," the vampire whispered, dipping his head to brush cool lips against Xander's heated ones.

"You like it," Xander replied, trying and failing to deepen the kiss.

"Yes I do," Spike said, and then, in a move that defied description and all laws of physics, he managed to rub his entire body against Xander's in a single, long undulation that left the human panting into his mouth.

"Do. That. Again," Xander demanded, and Spike happily repeated the motion again and again, watching the human's eyes roll back in his head with pleasure.

Xander blinked in confusion when Spike suddenly levered to his feet to stand over him. The vampire reached a hand down.

"We're stopping?" Xander asked, allowing himself to be pulled upright. "I don't want to stop. Stopping bad."

"Not stopping," the vampire purred, leading Xander across the room. "Relocating." He stopped and spun them around so that he could push Xander's back up against the door and plaster himself to the human's warm chest.

"Oh, good," Xander sighed, before threading his fingers into Spike's hair and pulling their mouths together. He gasped into the kiss as the vampire's nimble fingers went to work on the fastenings of both of their jeans, freeing their hard cocks and pressing them together with one hand. "Oh, good," Xander repeated. "Really good."

They both tensed when a knock sounded from the other side of the door.

"What?" they demanded in unison.

"Sorry," Dawn said, "just checking on you."

"If you'll go away, we'll be fine." Xander's voice wavered as Spike started slowly fisting their erections.

"So, you want me to go away?" she asked through the door, smothering a giggle.

"Yes, please," Xander replied, partially succeeding in biting back a groan as Spike sank to his knees before him, stripped jeans and boxers from his legs and stared at the wet, swollen head of his cock licking his lips.

"OK, if you and Spike will agree that I can go on a date with Isha," Dawn said.

"Uh huh! Yeah!" Xander shouted, as the vampire engulfed him to the root in his cool mouth.

"Cool!" Dawn squealed, and they heard her footsteps retreat.

"Oh, fuck! Spike! Jesusfuck, oh God!" Xander babbled as he was sucked hard and Spike started kneading and pulling at his balls. He clutched his hands in the vampire's blond curls and tightened them, pulling Spike's hair savagely, which only seemed to spur him on to greater speed and suction. Xander felt rather than saw Spike slip two fingers into his mouth, running them up and down the straining shaft, wetting them thoroughly.

"Ungggggh." Xander lost the power of speech as the spit-slick fingers began tracing the sensitive strip of skin behind his balls. He quickly freed one foot from the tangle of his pants so he could spread his legs. Spike's fingers moved back and traced his opening. The tip of one finger pushed inside, and Xander pushed back against it,

groaning as he was stretched and filled. Spike waited for a second, then pulled out and thrust back in with two fingers, twisting them, questing. He found the tiny bundle of nerves deep inside Xander's body and pressed.

The human's head slammed back against the solid door with a crack, and he slapped his own hand over his mouth to muffle the cry of "fuck, fuck, fuck!" that he couldn't stop. Spike twisted his fingers again and pulled back so that just the head of Xander's cock was in his mouth. He sucked hard, and Xander came, babbling nonsensically into the palm still cupped over his lips. Spike thrust his fingers into Xander as he swallowed once, then twice, then pulled away, rolling the last of the human's hot fluid around his mouth with his tongue.

Spike sat back on his heels and looked up at Xander, who had collapsed against the door, panting. Xander slid down to the floor, and Spike leaned forward and kissed him, letting the tiny bit of fluid in his mouth slide from his tongue to Xander's. The human tugged, and Spike fell gracefully, rolling them both back onto the mats on their sides. Xander caught his breath, and then reached between them to stroke a finger down the length of Spike's dripping erection.

"Ohhh," Spike moaned, and Xander could tell that he was very close to the edge. Looking

down, he traced the tip of his finger around the edge of the vampire's foreskin, pushing it back. He traced the ridge, then the slit, and then brought his thumb up to sweep over the head. He repeated the motion until Spike tilted his head up so their eyes could lock.

The vampire's eyes were almost black with lust, and Xander could feel his body shaking slightly. He pushed his other hand between Spike's legs and cupped his balls, rolling and tugging the velvet sac, walking his fingers along the slick skin of the vampire's perineum and sliding the tips of his fingers between his cheeks.

"Please, Xan," Spike begged. "Please touch me, make me come. I want you so much. Please, love."

The begging completely undid Xander, and he tilted his head to catch Spike's lips with his own as he wrapped one hand around the vampire's cock and began to stroke. He clasped the lower curves of Spike's hard buttocks with the other hand, allowing his spread fingers to dig into the firm muscle. Spike groaned and thrust into Xander's hot hand, twisting his fingers into sable waves and stroking the human's tongue with his own.

They writhed together on the padded floor until Spike stiffened and spilled his release between them, crying out into Xander's mouth. The two

men separated, falling onto their backs. Each instinctively shifted toward the other so that their hips touched. Xander looked down at their disarrayed clothing and laughed softly. He struggled out of his tee shirt and used it to wipe their bellies and his sticky hand, then tossed the soiled garment toward the trash bin in the corner.

Spike reached over and twined their fingers, drawing their meshed hands up onto his chest, where he could lean his head down to drop dainty kisses onto Xander's fingertips.

Xander replayed the events of the previous fifteen minutes in his head, and then groaned.

"What is it, love?" Spike asked, blue eyes flashing worriedly.

Xander brought his free hand up to rub over his eyes. "We agreed to let Dawn go out on a date with Isha," he explained.

Spike considered that for a moment with a serious look, and then brightened visibly. "Nope, you agreed - I didn't say anything."

Xander turned his head to catch his lover's eyes. "Do you want to explain to Dawn that you didn't answer the question because you had my dick in your mouth, or do you just wanna go along with the date idea?"

Spike seemed to weigh his options, and then sighed. "Fine, they can go out on a date. Let's get Willow to give him the new shovel talk."

### **Part Seventeen**

Buffy sat at her desk, sorting reports and idly sipping her Diet Coke. Social work was rewarding at times, but some days the utter tedium of bureaucracy and the drone of the fluorescent lights made her long for when a successful day's work included kicking the shit out of demons and trying to avoid getting vampire dust on her boots. She sighed and ran her hands through her hair.

Straightening up from her usual slump, Buffy pulled her keyboard closer. Opening her case calendar, she sighed again. This called for the big guns. Glancing around the open work area, she made sure none of her coworkers were watching and then slid the bottom desk drawer open. Nestled in the bottom was her stash of Belgian dark chocolate. It was much better than the supermarket chocolate she kept in the candy dish on the desk and much too good to be shared.

She broke off a square of the rich, dark candy and slipped it into her mouth, closing her eyes as it immediately started melting on her tongue. She chased the chocolate with a sip of soda, letting the sharp, icy liquid roll over it, firming it

back up on her tongue so that the returning heat of her mouth could melt it again. She repeated the process until the chocolate had melted away. This little ritual helped on days like today.

Buffy opened her eyes and swept them critically over her desk, noting the disarray of files, the business cards spilling out of the little brass monkey card-holder, the napkins left over from a hurried lunch. She had ten minutes before her status meeting with her boss. Resolutely ignoring the mess, she checked her email and finished off her drink. Gathering a stack of active case files, she stood and walked toward the glass-walled office.

Ah hour later, Buffy stood outside the building, lighting a cigarette and dialing on her cell phone. The smoking was an occasional thing, and it bothered her a little that she still felt like she had to hide it. That didn't stop her from hiding it, though.

"Magic Box," Willow chirped on the other end of the phone.

"Hey, Wills. You busy?" Buffy knew she sounded tired and guarded, and realized that Willow had picked up on it when she heard the other girl close her office door with a quiet snap.

"What's up, Buffy?"

Buffy exhaled smoke away from the phone.  
"Sia's parents have petitioned for a visit.  
Unsupervised. It's been granted."

"Shit," Willow swore softly. "Do you think they're trying to get her back?"

"I don't know. They just asked for the one visit and we've got no grounds to refuse. Do you want to tell her, or should I?"

"Tara and I will do it," Willow said, and Buffy was struck suddenly by the despair in her friend's voice.

"Hey, Willow, it's going to be OK. Sia is so happy with you guys, and she's not going anywhere. I promise you, she's staying with you, where she belongs."

Willow let out something that was halfway between a laugh and a sigh. "Are you giving me the 'resolve face', Buffy?"

"Yeah, close enough," Buffy said. "I'll have the details tonight, OK? Do we have plans with the guys?"

"Xander called earlier, they're going to meet us here at sunset. Did you know Dawn has a date with Isha?" Willow's voice took on the tone specific to girlfriends launching into the gossip zone. "I can't believe Spike agreed to that."

Buffy felt herself relax and fall into the warm cocoon of longtime friendship. "She had to have blackmailed him, you know how protective he is." Her cigarette was forgotten as the two girls chatted happily.

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The ringing phone woke Xander. He untangled himself from the intricately arranged prison of Spike's limbs and crawled to the side of the bed.

"Mmmph. What?" he croaked, clearing his throat and scrubbing a hand over his eyes.

"Sorry to wake you, Xander," Jack said in his usual measured tone. "Looks like the word is out. We've got about thirty-five fans down here in the lobby."

"Okay," Xander said. "Send up whoever's on, ask at the front desk about putting the fans in a conference room or something for a bit, and I'll try to get the rock star conscious and coherent. I know Annie sent a box of photos, so find them and get it all set up. Thanks, Jack."

Xander hung up the phone and turned back to the bed. Spike was awake, looking up at him from the pillow with a sleep-dazed expression. Xander moved to his hands and knees and arranged himself over the vampire so he could brush his lips lightly over the planes of Spike's face.

"Morning, sleepyhead," he said, grinning as Spike arched up into the contact, rubbing his face against Xander's stubbled cheek like a cat. Strong arms came up to encircle Xander's shoulders, and Spike pulled their bodies together. Xander dropped his shoulder and rolled so that the vampire was draped over his chest.

Spike nestled his head under Xander's chin and lay in an unresisting heap, drinking in the warmth of the body below him. "Fans, huh?" he asked.

"Yep. Dinner's on its way. You need to hit the shower and put on your rock star drag." Xander combed his fingers through Spike's unruly curls.

The vampire sighed. "Don't wanna," he said petulantly.

"Yes, you do," Xander replied, cupping the back of Spike's head with his palm. "You love it."

"Love this. Being with you like this," Spike's voice was muffled against Xander's neck.

Xander swallowed hard against the feeling that rose to his throat, and Spike lifted his head to look into his eyes. "You OK, mate?" he asked.

"Yeah," Xander said, his voice a rough creak. "Yeah," he repeated. "Not used to hearing stuff like that." The "from you" was left unspoken.

Spike's grin was brilliant, and he kissed Xander hard on the mouth. He drew back and grinned again. "I like surprising you." The vampire rose to his feet and shuffled off to the shower, leaving an amazed, aroused Xander lying on the bed with a big, dumb grin on his face.

Xander ate a French fry while watching Spike feed from Carl's arm. The huge black man never took his eyes off the football game playing on the television. As soon as Spike pulled away, Carl casually pulled down the sleeve of his sweatshirt and turned to the vampire.

"Did you see that call, man? Offsides my ass," he said.

"Don't look at me, mate - I don't understand American football," Spike replied. He gestured to Carl's arm. "Thanks."

"No sweat," Carl replied. Xander ate another fry.

Spike walked back into the bedroom to get dressed, and Xander contemplated Carl. He'd wondered how the change in his and Spike's status would affect his feelings about the bodyguards, and in the past two days he had watched Spike feed from both Carl and Ace with no untoward reaction.

He had enjoyed the sensation of Spike drinking his blood during sex. OK, enjoyed was a weak word for a feeling that had made him come so

hard he'd nearly blacked out, but - yeah, enjoyed. He thought about the idea of Spike feeding from him for food, not sex, and the idea didn't squick him out. Much. It did seem sort of impersonal, though.

His train of thought was completely derailed by Spike's reemergence from the bedroom. The vampire was shrugging into a faded cream-colored oxford over a plain white tee shirt. He was wearing black jeans and boots, and his hair was brushed back, tidy, but still retaining some curl. He looked young and sexy and happy. He was smiling. Xander looked at him and realized how infrequently he had seen Spike smile without reason in the past. Spike's usual facial expression was guarded, relaxed but observant, his predator nature at rest. The Spike in the doorway was relaxed, from the easy set of his shoulders to his small smile to the motions of his fingers, buttoning the last couple of buttons on his shirt. He was breathtaking.

Spike looked up and caught the appreciative gleam in Xander's eye, and his smile broadened. "I look OK?" he asked.

"Million bucks," Xander answered, "pre-tax, of course."

Carl flicked the remote to turn the TV off and walked to the door. Spike and Xander joined

him, and the vampire brushed his hand across Xander's as they left the suite.

Spike signed the final photo with a flourish and smiled at the speechless girl in front of him. "Here you go, sweetheart," he purred, and she walked away in a daze. The sun had set while Spike had shaken hands with and signed photos for each of the waiting fans, the smile never dropping from his face. As soon as the door of the conference room closed, he lowered his head into his hands and scrubbed his fingers over his cheeks.

He heard something hit the table and looked up. He smiled at Xander and picked up the beer that the other man had set down. "Thanks."

"You looked like you could use it. You up for going to Willow's? She's got some ideas for Giles' cure."

Spike drained the beer and stood. "Let's go." As Xander turned toward the door, Spike stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. He turned back, and was pulled into the circle of the vampire's arms and kissed thoroughly.

"What...what was that all about?" Xander asked, dazed.

"Wanted to," Spike answered.

"You have poor impulse control," Xander said, grinning.

"You just noticed?"

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Spike and Xander entered Willow and Tara's home in a happy, relaxed mood. Which dissipated as soon as they took in Willow's angry look, the shine of tears in Tara's eyes, and Sia's sullen posture on the sofa beside a grinning Giles.

"Bad time?" Xander asked.

Sia leapt up off of the couch and ran from the room. The sound of a slamming door reverberated through the house, and Spike winced.

"Bad time," Xander said. "What's going on?"

Willow stood up from her chair and gathered a box of tissues from a side table. She pulled a few from the box and gently pressed them into Tara's hand, giving her a sweet smile.

"Sia has to visit with her parents tomorrow, and she does not want to do it," Willow explained. "I tried to tell her that it's just for the day and that she's coming back here, but she thinks we're sending her away." Her anguish was obvious as

she put her arm around Tara's shoulder and rubbed soothingly.

Tara wiped her eyes with the tissues, and then crushed them in her hand. "She'll be OK. She just needs to get used to the idea. Her parents didn't react well when her powers started to manifest, and she's just scared. I'll let her cool off and then go talk to her."

Xander remembered that Tara's own family had reacted badly to her magical powers, and it had eventually led to a complete rift between them. Sia's situation had to be bringing back unpleasant memories. He crossed the room to the blonde witch and put his arm around her other shoulder.

"Well, Tara, if anyone can be counted on to talk down a hormonal teen witch, I'm thinking it's you," he said, grinning down at her. She returned the smile, and the tension in the room eased noticeably.

Xander turned to Willow. "Where are Buffy and Dawn?" he asked.

"They went to get the last two ingredients for Giles' cure!" Her excitement at being able to cure the Watcher outweighed her upset for a moment, and she bounced happily. "We found a potion that will counteract both of the poisons. It will

work slowly, but we're gonna get him back, Xander." Her relief was evident.

Xander hugged both women to him. "Good," he whispered into their blended hair, "Good. It'll be nice to talk to sane Giles again." The three turned to the sofa, where not-so-sane Giles was happily watching cartoons with Spike.

## **Part Eighteen**

Everyone watched as Giles drank the sweet-smelling potion that looked remarkably like orange juice. He drained the glass and handed it to Tara with a smile, and then turned back to the television. Tara shared a bemused look and a shrug with Xander and they walked to the kitchen, leaving the others in the living room. Once in the kitchen, Tara rinsed the glass and began clearing up the mess the potion-making session had left.

"Well," Xander said, opening the dishwasher and starting to fill it, "Willow said it would work slowly. I guess I was just hoping for an instant cure."

"Me, too," Tara said wistfully. "Even though I know better."

They worked silently for a few minutes until the kitchen door opened and an exhausted-looking Willow came in and slumped into one of the plain wooden chairs set around the table. She rested her forehead on her hands and sighed. Tara wiped her hands and moved to Willow, rubbing her shoulders and dusting a kiss across the top of her head.

"How's Sia?" Xander asked, finishing with the dishes and crossing to the refrigerator for a beer.

"Better. Not so mad. Were we that moody as teenagers?" She looked up at Tara.

"Probably," Xander answered. "But, we also had the whole slaying gig. I seem to remember that cutting into a lot of prime self-absorbed whining time."

Willow sighed. "She's just afraid that her parents are going to reject her again, and she thought we were rejecting her by making her go on the visit. I think I got her settled, but now she doesn't want to come out of her room because she's embarrassed for causing a scene."

Xander and Tara slid into the chairs flanking Willow, and the three friends looked at one another for a moment.

"Well, I don't really have any advice on this one. I mean, working with Spike is a lot like raising a child, but I don't really think I have any insight

for you." Xander's eyes twinkled, and he was happy that he could coax small smiles out of the two worried women.

Back in the living room, Spike rose to his feet and stretched. Buffy looked up from the TV and raised an eyebrow at him. He pointed toward the back of the house, and she stared after him as he walked away.

"Come in." Sia's voice was soft in response to Spike's knock on her door. He stopped in the doorway and leaned against the frame.

"Hey," he said, sliding his hands into his pockets.

"Hey," she replied. She was lying on the bed on her stomach. Her long, dark hair was hanging in her face and flowing down onto the notebook on the bed in front of her.

"Diary?" Spike asked.

"Kinda," she replied. She sat up on the bed and moved to close the notebook.

"Don't stop on my account," Spike said. "I just got bored watching the telly, thought I'd see what sort of trouble you were about."

Sia slid the notebook onto the bed table and pushed her hair behind her ear. The gesture revealed her delicate features and dark eyes. She looked at Spike thoughtfully.

"Do you write your songs?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I'm not...I couldn't. Um, I'm a better singer than writer, really."

"I sometimes write poetry," she confided, looking sideways at the vampire lounging in her doorway.

"Is it any good?" he asked.

"Probably not," Sia replied. "It doesn't always rhyme."

"Who says it has to rhyme? Some of the best poetry in the world doesn't rhyme," Spike told her, a frown wrinkling his brow. He pulled his hand out of his pocket and stepped further into the room, gesturing. "There's all kinds of poetry."

An hour later Xander found them sitting on Sia's bed with the notebook between them. Spike was crossing out a word and writing above it, and Xander just had to grin at the sight of the vampire writing with a hot pink gel pen, the tip of his tongue caught between his teeth in concentration.

"See?" Spike said, capping the pen and using it to point at the page. "Now the meter's right and it flows better."

Sia smiled up at him and took the proffered pen and notebook. "Thanks, Spike," she said.

Xander cleared his throat. "We're going to head out - the ladies need their beauty rest."

Spike and Sia shared an eye-roll, and Spike levered himself off the bed. As he turned to go, he reached out and ruffled her hair. "Later, Wednesday," he said.

"See ya, Fang," she replied casually.

As Spike reached the door, Sia stood up. "Um, Xander?" she said.

"Yes?"

"I wanted to apologize for earlier - the door slamming and, you know - teenager stuff."

"It's all right. You weren't nearly as bad as Spike in a snit. Apology accepted." Xander deftly sidestepped a punch in the arm from Spike, and the two men clasped hands as they walked down the hall.

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Bill slammed the door of the limo. By the time he made it to the front of the car, Spike raised the partition and pulled Xander into his arms.

"Impatient much?" Xander quipped, eyes dancing with laughter.

"Yes," Spike said, and then pulled Xander closer, brushing their lips together lightly. Cool lips traced Xander's mouth, then moved across his cheek to his ear, then trailed over his jaw and down his neck. Spike reached out one hand and depressed the button on the intercom.

"Where to?" Bill asked.

"Just drive," Spike said, and then executed a complicated maneuver that resulted in a reversal of their positions. Xander found himself sitting normally with Spike straddling his thighs. Always one to make the most of any situation, he grasped Spike's hips and pulled, bringing their bodies into closer contact. They both groaned as their erections brushed together through the barrier of their clothing.

Xander reached up and pulled Spike's mouth down to his. It started out gently, but within seconds the two men were kissing roughly, tongues fighting for dominance, teeth nipping, fingers flexing against each other's skulls. Xander pulled back far enough to get his hands between them. He laid his hands on Spike's thighs and then slid them slowly up the tense muscles until his thumbs rested on either side of Spike's zipper. Xander traced the jutting column of Spike's erection through the denim, digging his thumbs in enough to make Spike groan.

Xander broke the kiss to gulp in much-needed air and began jerking at the fastenings of Spike's jeans. The vampire lowered his mouth to Xander's neck, biting his earlobe, and then licking and sucking his way down tanned flesh until he reached the hollow of his throat. Xander felt Spike's moan vibrate against him when he finally freed the vampire's cock and began stroking it forcefully.

"Sir."

"Heh. You don't have to call me sir, Xan," Spike panted, raising his head. He made a sharp noise of protest when Xander's hand left his cock.

"Get over yourself," Xander said. "It's the intercom."

The car jerked to a stop at the same time Xander pushed the button to speak.

"Fuck," Spike exclaimed, climbing off of Xander's lap and struggling to zip his jeans.

Out the tinted window, Xander could see Buffy running toward them with five vampires in hot pursuit. A huge grin split her face as the two men stepped out of the car.

"Hey, guys," she called. "How about a little help here?"

Xander raised one hand and she expertly tossed him the stake she was carrying. She pulled two more from her back pockets and deftly palmed one to Spike as he caught her arm to pivot her to a stop facing their opponents.

The two vamps in the lead charged harder, and Spike and Xander stepped forward, dusting them easily. The other three were cagier, circling warily.

Buffy and Spike both rushed into the fight, punching, kicking and dodging. Xander dropped into a defensive crouch and waited. His opponent was very tall and thin, but he moved with liquid grace.

"Ah, shit," the vampire said. "Why do I have to fight the human?"

"Just unlucky, I guess," Xander quipped, still waiting.

"At least I get to eat," the vampire replied, and pounced.

Xander dodged the move and swept the vampire's feet out from under him, laughing at the surprised look on the creature's face as it fell.

"Dinner might have to wait," Xander said. He gleefully kicked the vamp in the head, and then leaned down to shove the stake through it,

remembering to hold his breath as the dust settled.

Xander straightened and had to laugh. Spike had his opponent, a hulking brute, by one arm and was rhythmically punching it in the face. Spike was talking, and he emphasized each word with a vicious blow.

"And. That. Is. For. Fucking. Up. My. Limo. Sex," he muttered, and then finished by finally staking the unfortunate vampire. He brushed the dust from his hands and turned toward Xander.

"You a little frustrated?" Xander asked.

"Not for too much longer," Spike answered, closing the distance between them. He looked over Xander's shoulder, checking on Buffy's progress with her opponent. Seeing that she was fine, he kissed Xander hard, holding him tightly by the back of the neck. Xander grabbed Spike's hips and slammed them against his own, groaning at the contact of their erections. The two men broke apart in time to watch Buffy dust her vamp, and they both clapped politely. Xander knocked on the car window and waited while Bill lowered it.

"You OK?" Xander asked.

Bill looked at him calmly. "I'm from Cleveland and I've driven the Rolling Stones," he said.

"OK then," Xander said. He turned to Spike and Buffy. "Wanna go back to the hotel and talk about this?" Buffy nodded; Spike shot him a dagger look.

"I won't stay long," Buffy reassured Spike, and he scowled at her. They piled into the limo for the short ride back to the Delta.

Ace and Isha met them at the portico, and both men began immediately berating Spike and Xander for going out unguarded. Xander took the abuse with a smile, but Spike invited them to "sod off" and stalked toward the hotel. Ace managed to get ahead of him and open the door, gesturing the annoyed vampire inside with a grand, sweeping gesture. The others followed.

After arriving in the suite, Xander sent Isha to get Jack and Carl.

"While we're waiting for the guys, do you want a drink, Buffy? Spike?" he asked. He returned to the living room with drinks. Spike nodded his thanks and pulled Xander down next to him on the sofa, looping an arm proprietarily over the human's knee.

The bodyguards arrived, and the group sat looking at Buffy expectantly.

"I'm on, I guess," she said, smiling. "I was just doing a routine sweep when that whole crowd

jumped me. I guess I disturbed a nest or something."

"I thought the vamps all moved on after the Hellmouth imploded?" Xander said.

"They did, or at least, they had," Buffy said, frowning. "I haven't seen five vamps together in years. Well, not here, anyway."

"Something's up," Spike said.

Buffy jumped when her cell phone trilled. She grinned sheepishly as she flipped it open and pressed a button.

"Hello?" She listened for a moment. "That's great!" Pause. "That's great." Pause. "Oh. That's bad. On our way." She clicked the phone shut. "That was Willow," she said. "Giles got up and handed her a book with a marked passage. She said he was pretty excited about it."

"Apocalypse?" Xander asked.

"Pretty much." Buffy nodded. "Needs more research, though."

"How's Giles now?" Xander asked.

"Willow said he wandered back to bed. We're supposed to meet at the Box." Buffy looked around the room at the bodyguards. "You guys don't have to get involved in this, you know," she said.

The four men exchanged short glances. Jack looked at Buffy, and then tilted his head toward Spike and Xander. "If they're in, we're in," he said.

Buffy looked at Spike and Xander, who nodded. "You're in, then," she said. "Welcome to the Hellmouth."

## **Part Nineteen**

Research was...research. Willow handed everyone dusty old volumes, and the bodyguards gamely started flipping through them, scanning for references to the Ritual of DeShand. It was proving elusive to the readers and to Willow, who was Googling at a rapid pace.

Spike read the page he was on for the sixth time and tried in vain to still the bouncing of his knee. He was wound up, horny and utterly sick of any activity that didn't include shagging Xander through the mattress. Trust a bloody apocalypse to get in his way yet again - the cosmic joke was wearing thin.

Buffy had gone back to Willow and Tara's house to stay with Giles and Sia, and Tara and Dawn had shown up a bit later with snacks and coffee

for the research crew, then joined in. Spike looked up to see Dawn's head nodding down towards her book, and he slammed his own closed, startling her back upright.

"That's it. Can't stand this anymore. Everybody go home," he said, tossing his book onto the table and jumping to his feet.

"But...research...and," Willow's protest was cut off by a huge yawn.

"My point exactly, Red," Spike said kindly. "You lot need some sleep." He turned his gaze to Xander, and his eyes promised something else entirely. Xander gave Spike a slow blink and an even slower smile.

"Right," Spike said. "Let's go."

The bodyguards stacked their books on the table and waited by the door in a grim line.

"We're never going to be able to go anywhere without them again, are we?" Xander asked Spike, eyeing the four muscular men.

"Probably not," was Spike's dry reply. "Guess we'll just have to stay in." He leaned his shoulder against Xander's and brought his hand up to clasp the tanned skin at the back of the human's neck. Xander shivered at the contact.

"Staying in is good," he said, and pressed his shoulder against Spike's side.

The girls finished securing the store, and Carl and Isha walked out first, followed by the Sunnydale crew. Jack and Ace fell in behind for the short walk to their cars. Once the women were safely away, the six men piled into the limousine, Jack in front and the others in back. It was rather a tight fit, but Spike didn't mind the necessity of sitting very close to Xander. He took the opportunity to drape his hand over the human's denim-clad knee and trace the bones there with his fingernails.

Back at the hotel, Spike managed to keep his hands to himself in the elevator through sheer force of will, but the moment the door of the suite closed behind them, all bets were off.

With one hand on his shoulder, Spike turned Xander and pushed him against the wall, rattling a painting and eliciting a chuckle that he cut off with his mouth. The chuckle turned into a groan, and Xander wrapped his arms around Spike and submitted to a sweet kiss.

Sweetness didn't last very long. The interrupted limo sex, the adrenaline of the fight and the complete and utter boredom of several long hours of research all combined to stretch Spike's limited patience to the breaking point.

"Want you, Xan," he whispered between kisses. "I want to fuck you." Spike felt Xander stiffen a little at the panted words, but there was no pause in the frantic kisses, and the grip on Spike's hips only intensified. Xander buried his face in Spike's neck and licked a path from collarbone to jaw. Spike shuddered as teeth and tongue rasped over his jugular. He tilted his head back and to the side, allowing Xander full access to the long column of his throat. Spike wrapped a hand into Xander's hair and pulled his head up so their eyes could meet. Xander's were hazy with passion, pupils almost comically huge. Spike's eyes were glittering, hard and predatory, and they followed the motion as Xander swallowed hard.

Spike stepped back and held out a hand. "Come to bed with me?" he asked, knowing that his eyes were making the question into a demand, and not caring very much. Xander nodded and allowed himself to be led to the bedroom. Spike reached out and began stripping off Xander's clothes, batting away the lust-clumsy hands that rose to assist and interfere. Spike then turned his hands to his own clothes and roughly threw them aside.

Spike climbed onto the bed and propped himself up against the headboard, pulling Xander down so that they were facing one another, with Xander's knees on either side of Spike's thighs.

The position brought their erections together and they both pushed forward to increase the contact. Xander snaked a hand between their bodies and encircled both of their cocks. Spike gasped at the twin sensations of Xander's rigid flesh and hot hand bracketing him.

Spike pulled Xander's head down and kissed him roughly, thrusting his tongue in time with Xander's strokes. With his other hand, he fumbled in the drawer of the bedside table. Finding what he was looking for, he expertly opened the tube of lubricant one-handed and soaked the fingers of his left hand.

Spike spread his own legs a little, opening Xander's above him. He slipped his hand beneath Xander's balls, letting the back of his fingers brush against the soft, velvety skin teasingly, and smiling when Xander gasped into his mouth. He didn't let up on the intensity of the kiss as he gently circled one fingertip around the opening to Xander's body, finally pressing inside. Xander was relaxed, and within seconds he was pushing down against Spike's hand, silently begging him to move.

Spike obliged, after a minute adding a second finger, twisting them and speeding his pace. This was as far as he had ever gone with Xander, as far as anyone had, to his knowledge. He tried to move slowly, but his control was frayed by the

sight, smell and sound of Xander, flexing his knees and fucking himself on Spike's hand.

Spike spread his own legs even further, and worked another finger into Xander's body, knowing that his tissues were stretching painfully. Xander's hand on their cocks stilled, and he broke the kiss to rest his head on Spike's shoulder to pant.

Spike stopped with his fingers halfway inside. "Xan, love," he said. "You're so fucking tight. You feel like velvet inside, all hot and slick and sweet." He petted Xander's hair and gently kissed the side of his neck. "Just relax and let me in, I won't hurt you. Much."

Xander laughed at his tone and lifted his head so their eyes could meet. At the same time, he pushed down, letting Spike's fingers slide fully into him. Spike felt Xander's body crushing his fingers together, fighting the intrusion until something relaxed and gave and he was able to move. He began moving his fingers in and out, unable to do more than keep up an uneven rhythm and watch lust, fear, surprise and pain war for dominance on Xander's face.

Lust was winning. Grimaces of pain quickly turned to something else. Xander's eyes were gleaming, and Spike could feel hot breath brushing his cheek, carried on waves of small gasps and moans.

"How you doing, love?" Spike asked.

"Very...non-verbal," Xander gasped. "'S good."

"Get verbal," Spike said; his voice strained with the need to hear the words. "Tell me."

"Want...you," Xander panted, and Spike pulled his hand quickly from between them.

He slicked himself and pulled Xander into position. He looked into Xander's eyes. "You're in charge, love," he said, smiling when he saw comprehension dawn. It took all of his control to not slam his hips upwards when Xander began to take him in, and he knew he was babbling about heat and softness and God and love and Jesusfuck and please, but couldn't stop himself.

When he was halfway inside, Xander stopped moving, holding his body tense, panting, eyes wild. "Don't know if...I can take it," he gasped.

"Yes, you can," Spike assured him. "For me, you can." He pulled Xander's head down to his and kissed him slowly and thoroughly, feeling his entire body start to relax.

Spike shouted into the kiss when Xander flexed his knees, slamming their bodies together in a swift move. They both froze in place.

Xander pulled back and looked into Spike's face, the look in his eyes a mixture of lust, triumph and pain. "Glad it was you...first."

The words broke Spike's very tenuous hold on his control and he started moving inside Xander, grabbing his thighs hard enough to bruise, rolling his hips and thrusting wildly. The movement was enough to send Xander over the edge; the clenching of internal muscles was Spike's undoing and he let go.

By the time either one could form a coherent sentence, they were almost sealed together with drying sweat and other fluids. Both men hissed as they pulled apart, and Xander's knees made ominous cracking noises as he finally unbent them. He fell heavily onto the other side of the bed, face-down.

"You OK?" Spike asked.

"Mrrmmphmmmm," Xander replied into the pillow.

"I see verbal's still shot to hell, how are you on math?"

Xander lifted one hand and flipped Spike the bird.

"One. That's a good start." He tiredly pushed at a tanned shoulder. "Shower."

Xander turned so he could blink lazily at Spike.  
"Too far."

Spike reached out and smoothed Xander's hair back from his face, and then leaned in for a gentle kiss. He pulled back and smiled. "Shower; you smell like a whorehouse."

Xander rubbed his face against the pillow. "You sweet-talker, you," he sighed, and then levered himself off the bed. He hesitated for a second, then leaned down and bit the enticing globe of Spike's shiny, white ass.

At Spike's indignant, "Hey!" he sprinted for the bathroom.

Spike followed.

**The End**