

Pairing: Spike/Xander

Rating: *Explicit*

Summary: *"Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end."*

Disclaimer: *Not mine, all theirs.*

Warnings: *None.*

A/N: *Written for 🍷fall_for_sx and dedicated to 👤zowiebwalker*

Everything You Ever

by

Emelye

Buffy was in hell. And he'd put her there.

Tara was moving out of the Summers' house. His best friend was a junkie and bound for rehab in England with Giles.

Xander left for the Bronze while Anya was still dancing the dance of the liberated shopkeeper. He didn't begrudge her her happiness. He understood what these tangible signs of human success meant to her.

That being said, it was a bit much to expect him to jump in with a hip shake and shimmy over the thought of Giles packing it in for England and his best friend falling off the wagon, then being run over by said wagon, then backed over once more for good measure. There was beer for that. Or there would be if he'd trusted himself enough to drink at that moment. Right then? He was just a little too upset and he knew that way lay a very slippery slope, indeed.

So Xander sat at the bar, pointedly not drinking, and tried not to feel like a pathetic townie surrounded by high school kids with their whole lives ahead of them and college kids with a hope of a future that didn't involve hellmouths and magic addiction and ill advised resurrections.

It wasn't going too well.

"Refill?" The bartender asked, poised to freshen his coke.

Xander nodded and ignored the odd looks he was getting for teetotalling along side the hardened mid-twenties crowd with their long-island ice teas and mudslides. He might be jaded at twenty-one but at least he wasn't deluding himself.

“Oh. My. God. Did you see those two over by the stairs?”
A very peppy blond co-ed asked her friend at the bar.
Xander eavesdropped shamelessly, claiming the
prerogative of those who drank alone.

“Where?” Peppy co-ed number two replied with a flip of
her hair.

“Over there! Look, you can see the guy’s bleached hair.”

Xander turned with the blond to look. *Please don’t be
Spike, please don’t be Spike, I don’t need this tonight,
please don’t be...goddammit!*

It was Spike. It was *always* Spike. Xander sighed feelingly,
slapped a five on the bar and left to see whose girlfriend
he was macking on before a fight had a chance to break
out.

“All right, Spike, say goodnight to the nice lady and—”

And.

Xander’s voice died in his throat as he rounded the stairs.
“Let me guess. You lost your keys and you decided to

look for them in Spike's larynx?"

Buffy pushed Spike off her. Hard.

"Xander, it's not what it looks like," she insisted wearily. Spike wasn't disagreeing but then he wasn't saying much. He was rubbing the back of his head where it had hit a step and looking between the two of them.

"Spike, how about an explanation," he prompted.

"Actually, Spike was just leaving, weren't you, Spike?" Buffy said quickly. Spike huffed and pulled his coat around him tighter. An idea was starting to form in Xander's brain, closely followed by a picture and a notion and he didn't like any of them one bit.

"Are you two...seeing each other?" he asked as calmly as he could.

"Yes."

"No."

Xander rolled his eyes at the repressive look Buffy gave Spike. Spike looked like he was covering a world of

disappointment with the bitter shake of his head. “So I guess you weren’t planning on telling anyone.”

“Xander, there’s nothing to tell,” Buffy said. Spike made a noise.

“Do you like him?” Xander asked simply.

“God, *no!*” she protested. Xander continued to wait. “I don’t...know, it’s complicated.”

Spike had lit a cigarette and was smoking and staring at his boots, his shoulders hunched up like he was bracing himself for a blow. He was keeping his mouth shut for once and it was unnerving Xander.

“Buffy, ether you like him or you don’t. I mean, it’s Spike, and oh my god I think you’re insane, but hey, you’re a grown woman and you can play find-the-uvula with whomever you like. Unless you don’t like. Then we have a problem.”

“I don’t see how it’s any of your business what I do.”

“It’s my business because I’m your friend and I care. And when my friend is making questionable decisions, it’s my

job to ask the questions about the decisions.”

“So that gives you the right to judge me? Because you’re such a model of good decision making these days, is that it?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, gee, I don’t know, raise anyone from the dead lately? What kind of questions were you asking when that was on the table Xander?”

“Enough! Okay, I get it! I fucked up! We—Willow, Anya, Tara and I—fucked up. You know where Spike was when we were busy ruining your eternal reward? *Taking care of Dawn*. Because he cared about you. You decide you give a crap about the vamp that’s carried a torch for you for the last year, fine by me. But don’t do this sneaking around crap. It’s beneath you.”

Buffy’s lip trembled and she cut her eyes away. “I can’t deal with this,” she announced and disappeared in to the crowd.

Xander felt like asshole and a bully. Spike glared at him, gathered up the remains of his pride and stalked off.

Xander tried not to feel guilty about ruining his chances with Buffy. Mostly, he just wished he'd had that beer.

However badly Xander thought he'd screwed up, however, he must have said something right. Two days later, Spike seemed to get his happily ever after, after all.

Dawn called the night after the big showdown at the Bronze, waking him from a sound sleep to tell him Buffy wasn't home. He blearily made his excuses to Anya as he crawled over her and into his jeans beside the bed.

He stayed the night on the Summer's couch, not bothering to pull it out, expecting Buffy to walk through the door at any moment, breathless and energized from slaying. She never came home, though, and Xander woke at five to Dawn's weird, Japanese alarm clock.

There were hickies on Buffy's neck when she finally appeared in the kitchen doorway as Xander made pancakes for Dawn. She looked avoidy, but "Good night?" he asked, as neutrally as possible.

Buffy loosened her shoulders a little and smiled. "Yeah, um, you were right. About the thing. And I think we're going to talk about it tonight."

So she'd been with Spike. And for some reason Xander found that thought comforting. "Great! That's...that's great Buff. I'm...well, *happy* is probably too strong a word..."

"I get it," Buffy stopped him with an eye roll.

"What are we happy for?" Dawn asked, entering the conversation by way of the room.

Buffy ignored her. "Be here tonight?" she asked him, sparing a meaningful glance in Dawn's direction.

Xander nodded. "Yeah, of course."

Buffy smiled and bounced a little on the balls of her feet. "Great! Well I'm just gonna go do that hygiene and sleep thing now."

After she left he heard Dawn's muttered, "Walk of shame."

Xander frowned and gave her another pancake.

Spike arrived at the house at ten past six with flowers

and a shit-eating grin that would have ordinarily irritated the hell out of Xander. But in this case, he'd won. Spike got the girl, and Xander could forgive a little smugness. Xander stepped aside. "Come on in, Spike."

"Is Buffy here?" Spike asked as Dawn snatched the bouquet from Spike and ran to the kitchen in search of a vase.

"She'll be down soon, I'm sure."

Spike sighed. "I'm acting a prat, aren't I?" he asked Xander, bravely.

Xander shrugged. "Still an improvement over the last vamp she dated. Course, he didn't set the bar very high."

Spike snorted. "Think I can control my pescecidal urges."

"Wait, there's a *word* for it? Is that a real thing?"

Xander never found out for sure as Buffy chose that moment to appear, smile looking a little forced as Spike gleefully announced their courtship. Xander and Dawn sent them on their way with a tasteful minimum of teasing.

“So Spike and Buffy,” Dawn observed when they’d gone.

“Yep,” he replied, trying out casual acceptance and finding it wasn’t as hard as he thought it would be.

Dawn flipped a page in her YM magazine and snapped her gum. “Good for him.”

And, for a while anyway, they seemed really happy together.

They’d always fought well together, but watching them on patrol after they became coupled was kind of like kung fu meets porno. When the dust settled around them, literally, more often than not, there would be injury checks that inevitably turned into making out. It was very distracting.

Xander’s face flushed when Anya hit his arm during one such patrol. “Quit staring. Unless you want to role-play later...” she trailed off, suggestively.

Xander cleared his throat. “No, An. A world of no.”

“They are very pretty together, though, aren’t they?” she

observed with her usual candor.

Xander smiled and shook his head, attention once again on his girlfriend. “I’ve seen better,” he said and Anya blushed prettily.

In truth though, the Spike and Buffy show was at the forefront of his mind more than he’d like to admit.

Spike held doors for Buffy. Not that that was such a big deal. He did the same for Anya. Xander even held her car door for her—which she told him wasn’t strictly necessary, but still won him points he suspected. Anya always gave him a blinding smile no matter how often he did it. So he kept doing it. She had a very nice smile.

Buffy seemed not to notice. At the movie theater on date night, he opened the outer door for both women and got a peck on the cheek for his efforts. He was still grinning when he saw Spike, still holding the inner door, ignored utterly, wearing a blank expression.

Before Xander had a chance to even think, Spike was smirking. “Lady knows her due,” he said cockily, strutting in after the girls. Xander smiled and nodded, but he didn’t miss how Buffy shook off his hand when he tried

to take it walking into the theater.

He also couldn't help but notice the way Spike sank back into the shadows whenever they went to the Bronze. The first time they were all there together they sat at a high top, perched awkwardly on their stools, Spike practically vibrating with the pleasure of being seated beside Buffy. Buffy only seemed interested in talking to Xander, however, and it wasn't long before Spike was scratching the paint off the table top and Anya was tapping her nail on her teeth.

"Buffy, you do know Xander's my date, right?" she asked at last, bored and tactless.

Buffy colored and forced a smile. "Of course!"

"Xander can we dance?" Anya asked. Xander smiled gamely and allowed her to lead him onto the dance floor.

Behind him he overheard Spike's quiet, "Fancy a turn, Slayer?"

Xander didn't catch her answer, but when he and Anya finished, Buffy was nowhere to be found and Spike was peeling the label off his bottle of beer.

After that, they usually arrived as a nominal foursome but Spike no longer sat with them at their table. One evening he caught Spike lurking by the men's room when he happened by.

"What's the what?" he fished.

Spike blew out a lungful of smoke. "Miss me Harris?" he mocked.

Xander glared. "Funny, I thought even vamps would generally spend their dates with their, y'know, dates. Or is this some strange Victorian courtship ritual?"

Spike sneered. "Suppose I could paw at the Slayer in public like you and your bird, but some things are best kept for private. Don't want to cause an uproar." This last he said with a lascivious grin.

Xander rolled his eyes. "Don't flatter yourself. Just wondered why you disappeared, is all. Girls like Buffy don't usually get blown off by their dates."

Spike's brow furrowed. Xander left him with his thoughts and returned to their table, but it wasn't long before he

saw Spike join Buffy on the dance floor.

Xander couldn't hear what was said as Buffy stopped dancing, looking around self-consciously. Spike reached out a hand to her arm. She stepped out of reach before running out the back. Spike lowered his hand and his head and stepped back into the shadows of the club.

Xander didn't know what it meant. He and Anya left a short while later but he was thinking of the frustration and defeat in Spike's body language long into the night.

If Buffy seemed cold and unaffected in public, however, in private it was entirely another matter.

Xander found Dawn munching a bowl of cereal when he arrived to take her to school the next morning. Spike was apparently having his ear nibbled off by Buffy, but he broke away when Xander appeared in the doorway.

"Gah! Get a room you two," Xander teased.

"Yes. Please," Dawn added, dryly. Spike cleared his throat but Buffy looked supremely unconcerned.

"Sorry, Nibblet," Spike offered. "Harris—was just telling

Buffy I thought she might give a thought to calling the Watcher about some of these expenses,” he said, gesturing to the stack of bills on the kitchen island.

“And I was telling Spike,” Buffy said loftily, “that it’s none of his business.”

Xander had to wonder that he’d never considered it before. “Um, he might have a point, Buff. I mean, Giles is on the payroll and he’s not even watching you anymore. You’d think they’d—”

“Please, first financial advice from the undead and unemployed, and now I’m supposed to listen to the man who buys his blue collars at Goodwill?” Buffy snapped.

Xander was too taken aback to respond but was saved the trouble when Dawn and Spike, of all people, leaped to his defense.

“Bitch much?” Dawn shouted as Spike said, “Slayer, that was a bit out of line. Boy was just—”

“Just trying to tell me how to live my life like everyone else around here, except of course for Giles, who apparently thinks I’m a lost cause.”

It was nine thirty-five. Dawn was late for school and he was going to be late for work. With a sideways glance to Spike, who nodded him away and resumed his defensive posture, Xander left him to calm down Buffy, but escape was unfortunately about as comforting as the thought that he'd just left Spike to try and reason with Buffy.

He stopped by on his way home from work that night to see how things were. Dawn opened the door in a huff.

"Buffy's gone," she announced.

Through his shock, he heard Spike call from the back of the house. "Don't be dramatic, Dawn, she just went out for a bit s'all."

Dawn rolled her eyes and opened the door further to let Xander in.

Spike was sitting at the kitchen island with a bag of frozen peas on his jaw and glowering at a mug of blood.

"Does that actually work for you?" he asked, gesturing to the peas as he took a bottle of beer from the fridge left from the last time he came over to watch movies with

the girls. He wordlessly offered one to Spike who shook his head. Xander removed the cap and took a long drink as he sat across from the sullen looking vampire.

“Not without proper circulation, not really. Dulls the ache a bit.”

Xander nodded.

“Buffy really needs to learn to use her big girl words,” Dawn complained, pulling a frozen pizza from the freezer and turning on the oven.

“Buffy did that?” he asked, pointing to the stunning rainbow of pain blossoming on Spike’s face.

Spike shrugged. “Social worker showed up after you left. Reckon she wasn’t too pleased to introduce me as the boyfriend. Anyway the old broad wanted proof of income or some such. After she left Buffy started in on some rubbish about flipping burgers, an’ I told her she ought to stop fooling around and call the Watcher. May have made a comment to the effect of her pride not being worth Dawn getting taken away. Then...” Spike mimed a haymaker and Xander hissed sympathetically.

“So where’d she go?” he asked.

“Probably venting her frustration,” Spike muttered wearily.

“Slaying?” he clarified.

Spike glared at him. “No, skeeball.”

“Hey, don’t start with me, buddy, I’m not the one who clocked you,” he retorted.

“And what’s up with that?” asked Dawn. “Suddenly it’s open season on boyfriends?”

Xander was about to quip about Spike bringing out the best in all of them, but he stopped himself. Buffy had turned a seasoned soldier into a walking neurosis and she hadn’t been blowing quite this hot and cold back then. From the look of doubt and self-loathing on Spike’s face, he was going to be a masterpiece of insecurity by the time Buffy was through with him. It was gone almost as fast as it had appeared, and was swiftly replaced by cocksure swagger.

“S’her nature, ain’t it? Fighting gets her hot and

bothered. This?” he said, gesturing to the baseball sized bruise. “Just a little love tap. She’ll be back, make no mistake, an’ it won’t be a fight she’ll be looking for neither.”

Xander shook his head at Spike’s leering expression. “That’s sick Spike. That’s really sick.”

“Oh really? So Anya doesn’t love it when you take her over your knee then?” Spike baited.

Dawn was wide-eyed and hanging on their every word behind him. Xander blushed and swallowed. “That’s different.”

“How? Little pain gets the blood flowing—”

“Because when—I mean—*if* Anya and I were to do anything like that, it’d be different.”

“Well, of course. Reckon a shot to the mouth would be a bit advanced—”

“No, you moron, because you don’t hit the people you love in anger. Ever.” Spike closed his mouth and looked away. Xander didn’t know why it was so important to

him to say it, but he heard himself repeat, “I would never hit Anya like that. You don’t hit the people you love.”

Spike didn’t have a response to that, and Xander, feeling as if he’d said too much, pushed his seat back and left.

It bothered him. Enough that it was distracting him from his fun filled afternoon with Anya, comparing retirement plans and investment portfolios. Finally he gave up the pretense that he was actually paying attention and flat out asked her the question that had been on his mind.

“What’s the deal with them?”

Anya shrugged. “Well the sex is probably pretty fantastic. Two super-powered people. I’m sure she’s very flexible...”

Xander smiled. “I get that. But is it worth everything else? Do they even like each other? Sex is good. But, y’know, it’s not everything.”

Anya closed her file folder thoughtfully. “No, it isn’t. Passion is important though.” She seemed to be gathering her courage to say something, which automatically made his balls start crawling upwards.

Such was life with a sexually adventurous ex-demon.

“You’re a very good boyfriend,” she began, “and we get along great. You’re my best friend. You take care of me, and you screw like a Viking and you’re very supportive.”

Xander laughed nervously. “Why do I sense a but in there?”

Anya’s brow creased as she studied her hands on the tabletop. “Sometimes...I wish you looked at me like he looks at her.”

And it suddenly wasn’t the conversation he expected to be having. “You know I love you, Anya.”

Anya smiled. “I know you do, Xander. But I don’t think you need me. Not the way Spike needs Buffy, like air, or I guess, blood.” Anya shuffled the papers on the table nervously. “Are...are you sure you want to do this?”

“Of course I—”

“Xander.”

Xander didn’t understand what was happening as he

found himself admitting, “I gotta say I’m scared, because I think I know what you mean about passion, and I don’t know what’s wrong or how to fix it. I know I love you, but *this is it*. What if that’s the missing piece that blows us up in ten years?”

“Xander, are you more afraid of losing me or of failing?”

Before he had a chance to respond, Anya was collecting up the papers on the table and putting them back into the file. She took his hand.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever stop loving you, Xander. I don’t want to live without you in my life. I don’t know how to live without you in my life, but I want that passion. And you should find someone that makes you feel like that, too.”

Which was the point where Xander thought he might have started crying. “No wedding?”

Anya shook her head. “No wedding.”

Xander broke down and he didn’t know if it was due to relief or regret. But Anya waited patiently until he pulled himself together. When he looked up, she was crying

too.

She hit him. “You stupid man, you’ve ruined my eye makeup.”

Xander laughed and she did too. “I’ll call and see if my old place is still open,” she said looking mournfully at the coved ceiling.

Xander shook his head. “No, An. Keep the apartment. You love this place. I only got it to make you happy. If it still makes you happy, I want you to have it.”

“Well I can afford the rent now that Giles has turned over proprietorship of the Magic Box,” she considered practically. “But where will you go?”

Xander shrugged. “I don’t know. But that’s not important right now. I can take care of myself.”

Anya smiled sadly. “I know. You’ve always been very good at taking care of me.”

Xander cupped her face. “I hope I never have to stop.”

Anya closed her eyes and leaned into the touch with a

little sigh. Her eyes were bright and her voice a little breathless when she spoke. “One more time?” she asked.

Xander gave her one more time. The next morning, he left for work, knowing it was the last time he would leave that apartment and Anya as home, but despite the duffle bag in his hand holding his most necessary worldly possessions, felt much lighter for it.

Lucky for him, his boss had a line on a bachelor cottage just off the access road to Breaker’s Woods. Xander came into the office to go over crew assignments for the week and left with a set of keys.

“It’s in rough shape, Harris,” his boss said. “My wife’s family hasn’t been there in a couple years, but it shouldn’t be too tough to bring up to code.”

“I don’t have a lot saved—” Xander interrupted him.

“You’ll be doing me a favor taking it off my hands for two grand. Hell, I’ll even throw in your lumber and materials. We got a deal?”

Xander could hardly believe his good fortune.

The house was small. Very small. There were two stories, a small dine-in kitchen and living room on the first floor, separated by a small bathroom. There was a wood burning stove for heat, still operable and nothing much in the flue save for a lot of soot. Up a small spiral staircase was the bedroom and a small sleeping porch. The cedar shingles needed replacing, the wiring looked like it had been done when Hoover took office, and he was more than a little concerned about the plumbing, but the foundation was sturdy, the bones were good, the floors were solid and it was *his*.

Xander set up a cot on the sleeping porch and went to work.

Working on the house gave him time to think. It was peaceful and quiet out in the woods. The cedar shingling was restfully monotonous and he finished in one day. In truth, he was kind of disappointed the whole project was finished as quickly as it was. It had been a nice break from As the Hellmouth Turns.

He couldn't hide forever, though. After the last of the furniture was in place, he drove to Buffy's to announce his bachelorhood and make sure they all survived his brief absence.

They had. And they were much as he left them, both sisters screaming at one another at top volume. Dawn was complaining loudly that Buffy was never home anymore. Buffy was insisting that Dawn deliberately misbehaved at school to force Buffy to talk to Giles.

The argument became fairly convoluted at that point and Xander decided to spare his ears and step in.

“Ladies! Just stopped by to let you know Anya and I have amicably decided to go our separate ways. I have a new place. And just as soon as I can, I’ll have you break it in with a very, very small hootenanny. Meanwhile, anyone up for the Bronze? Because I am suddenly very single and very into spending time with my two best girls. What do you say?”

Buffy and Dawn stared at him in open-mouthed shock.

“Xander, you broke up with Anya? Are you okay?” Dawn came over and hugged him tightly around the waist.

He smiled and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “I’m fine. We just realized that we were better off as friends. Trust me, it’s better this way.”

Buffy nodded sympathetically. "I am definitely up for getting out."

"Is Spike coming?" Dawn asked.

Buffy smiled too brightly. "I think he has somewhere else to be tonight."

"Are you sure Buff?" Xander asked. "I mean, you don't have to un-couple just because I'm not couply any more."

"It's *fine*," Buffy snapped. "Look, we don't have to do everything together. And tonight is about you. So let's just go, okay?"

Xander exchanged a look with Dawn. "Okay, Buff. Your call. Just as long as you know he's welcome, okay?"

Buffy snorted, "Since when are you president of his fan club?"

"I'm president of the *Buffy* fan club. And whoever makes you happy, makes me happy," Xander declared.

Buffy grabbed her purse off the table and moved toward the door with a wry smile. "So if I say, broke up with Spike and got back with Angel..."

"As long as you and I are the only happy ones in this scenario, then I say mazel tov."

The Bronze was packed and Buffy and Dawn went straight to the dance floor leaving Xander in charge of staking out a table and procuring beverages. He was at the bar waiting for Diet Cokes when he caught sight of Spike in the entryway, glancing over the crowd, a bouquet of flowers in his hand for Buffy. Xander waved at him and Spike nodded and made his way over.

"Whelp," he greeted.

"Fangless. The girls are dancing."

"So I see," he replied, then frowned, obviously noticing one less blond head than usual. "Your bird not here, then?"

Xander grimaced. "Anya and I broke up."

Spike looked genuinely surprised. "When?"

“Few nights ago,” Xander said, taking the Cokes off the bar and nodding his head toward an open table in the corner.

Spike dropped the flowers on the table and slid into a seat. “Catch her with another bloke?” he asked sympathetically.

“What? No,” he said, confused.

“Demon? Big fella, huh?”

“WHAT? Spike, no! Why would you think that?”

Spike shrugged innocently. “Just figured—”

“Well you figured wrong, pal! I’ll have you know Anya was completely satisfied in that department!”

Spike raised his eyebrow.

“Oh yes! She was!”

“Then what was the problem, mate?”

Xander shrugged. “Just wasn’t the one, I guess. We were great friends, and the sex was good, but, y’know when I thought about getting married one day, I didn’t figure we’d be sitting down and discussing our finances like we were merging a couple of corporations, you know? I thought there’d be a little more...something. It was comfortable. Love isn’t comfortable, or it’s not supposed to be. Right?”

Spike lit a cigarette and took a long drag, blowing out the smoke in that way that seemed to be the exclusive domain of fifties film icons and Spike. Xander couldn’t make smoking look cool.

Spike could have had the Surgeon General lighting up in envy.

“Didn’t used to think so,” he said, flicking his silver lighter open and closed meditatively.

To say that Xander was surprised by his comment would have been an understatement, but before he could ask Spike what he meant,

“What are you doing here?” Buffy hissed, accusingly at his elbow.

Even Spike seemed surprised by her vitriol. Dropping his lighter on the table, he smiled winningly. “Felt like going out. Hoped I might run into you.”

The flowers were abandoned on the table as Buffy dragged Spike bodily off into the crowd.

“Wow,” commented Dawn, coming up to the table as the others vacated.

“Hey, when you gotta dance, you gotta dance,” Xander covered awkwardly.

Dawn just rolled her eyes. When it became evident an hour later that they weren’t coming back, Xander grabbed the flowers and offered Dawn a ride home.

“Don’t forget Spike’s lighter,” she told him, pointing to the silver Zippo on the table. Xander pocketed it. It had a soothing weight to it—probably why Spike liked it so much.

“I’ll make sure he gets it,” he assured her.

Back at the new homestead, Xander threw the flowers in

a pitcher and set them on the table with a little smile at how homey it made the place look. “Buffy’s loss,” he muttered, hanging his coat behind the door where the lighter fell onto the floor.

“Shit,” Xander sighed, picking it up off the hardwood and shrugging back into his coat.

Xander stood at the entrance to Restview, clutching his stake in one hand and the lighter in the other and questioned the sense in bringing back the lighter *right that minute*.

“You’re here now, dumbshit. Might as well make yourself a moving target,” he said, castigating himself and heading toward Spike’s crypt.

The vamp came from his left behind a blind of shrubs. Xander shouted and flailed, dropping his stake. The vamp laughed, launching itself at Xander and tackling him to the ground. Xander struggled for a moment, his arms pinned at his sides, when he found his hand closing around the Zippo. A moment later the vamp was shrieking as it burned, and Xander was composing himself to knock on Spike’s door.

There was no answer. Maybe he wasn't home yet? Xander pushed open the door, figuring he'd leave the lighter on the sarcophagus, but Spike was there, lying on the stone slab.

"Hey, um, you left your lighter at the Bronze," Xander explained, rolling his eyes at how stupid that sounded.

Spike didn't answer.

"Spike? You all right?" Xander approached him slowly.

"Just leave it, Harris."

Xander didn't know if he meant the lighter or the question. "Um, where do you want me to put it?" he asked, deciding ignorance was the better part of valor.

Spike sat up with a sigh that was equal parts pain and frustration and Xander couldn't help the shocked sound he made as he took in the battered face, bruises mottling Spike's torso and cuts above his eyes, lip swollen and bleeding. His first thought, was something along the lines of *oh my God, Glory's back*.

Then Xander saw the look he was growing to dread in

Spike's eyes and he didn't have to ask what happened at all. He saw, and he understood, and his heart ached a little more for what had broken irreparably in the beautiful blond-haired girl he fell in love with a lifetime ago, and the vampire destroying himself trying to fix it.

"Wow!" Xander exclaimed. "You know, if you and Buffy ran into something nasty you should have called. I mean, sure, if it did that to you it'd probably would have tossed me into a building, or, possibly, through one, but distraction can be a good thing if it keeps the big guns from getting used as demonic chew toys. What was it anyway?"

Spike's expression was blank and uncomprehending as Xander babbled. Xander knew the moment that Spike figured it out though, as a tear rolled down his cheek. Spike ignored it and cleared his throat. "Big one, yeah. Bout seven feet tall, all horns and teeth."

"I'll bet you and Buffy mopped the floor with it though, right?"

"Damn right we did," Spike confirmed, getting into the story. "Was going after the young girls leaving the club, but Buffy had to get involved of course," he complained.

Xander smiled sadly. "She's a hero. It's what she does."

Spike nodded tightly. "Anyway, it would have ripped her throat out, but I managed to get a hold of a couple of its horns. Gave me a good ride, though..." he explained, gesturing to his bruised and broken body.

"Buffy save the day?"

"Course she did. Took it's head clean off. Not before I got in my licks, though," he added.

Xander agreed easily. "She couldn't have taken that thing on alone."

"She'll never have to," Spike added, under his breath.

It was a beautiful story.

Xander stood there awkwardly for a few minutes, hands twitching with the urge to find some tape to wrap the ribs Spike was neglecting. With a sigh, he gave up. "Right, well you've got your lighter, so I'll just be going now."

Spike nodded. "Thanks mate," he said, quietly. As

Xander's hand was on the door, Spike called out, "You still got that stash of blood in your freezer? I'm running a bit low. Thought I might swing by for it tomorrow night."

Xander did a quick mental inventory and recalled packing it in a foam cooler with his frozen veggies. "Yeah, you need directions to my new place?"

Spike seemed surprised. "You moved out?"

Xander shrugged. "She loved that place. Anyway I got a small cabin up in Breaker's woods, just about a mile up the access road. It's small but it's got some amazing old maple floors."

"Bugger the floors mate, you'll be demon kibble living out there on your own."

Xander smirked. "Well let's hope they don't get hungry before you get a chance to collect your blood."

Spike glared, then winced as the expression put pressure on his swollen eye. "Right then, help me up," he said, holding out his arm.

Xander gave him a hand down from his perch, noting the

hiss of pain as he put weight on his right leg. “That’s not broken is it?”

Spike shook his head. “Just a deep bruise. You got a bath?”

“Big claw foot tub. New shower attachment,” he added, remembering Spike’s weakness for indoor plumbing from the basement days.

“Not one of those rain shower deals?”

Xander nodded with affected disinterest. “Sure, why?”

Spike stiffened his spine. “Insurance. M’not letting anything eat you until I’ve gotten my blood.”

“I appreciate your concern. Feel free to avail yourself of my plumbing while you generously delay my inevitable death.”

Xander helped Spike on with his shirt and supported his limping weight on the walk to his parked car.

Spike was obviously worn out by the short trip home. Despite promises of steaming up his bathroom, Spike

was asleep on his couch before Xander could finish emptying his pockets into the change tray on the kitchen counter.

In the moonlight, Spike curled on his sofa looked young, and horribly vulnerable. Xander covered him with an afghan and climbed the stairs to his bedroom.

He'd been asleep for probably no more than half an hour when he woke suddenly and completely, knowing he was being watched. Spike stood silently at his bedside, not asking and not really needing to. Xander scooted over and flipped down the bedclothes in invitation. Spike slowly and painstakingly undressed, then slid into bed beside Xander. For a long while they lay side by side, unmoving until Xander reached down to scratch his knee and brushed against Spike's arm. Spike sucked a breath in through his teeth and Xander immediately apologized.

"Sorry," he whispered. "Did I hurt something?"

Spike shook his head in the dark. Xander couldn't really see him but he somehow knew anyway. "Warm," Spike explained.

"Human," Xander said, stupidly.

Spike snorted. “Know that, berk.” And then more quietly, “Feels good.”

Xander didn't question what happened next. Opening his arms to the vampire made as much sense as anything else up until that point and Spike's little moan of relief as the warmth of Xander's skin soaked into his battered muscles affected him on a soul-deep level. Suddenly nothing in the world was more important to him than giving Spike whatever comfort he needed. Soothing them both, Xander held Spike and slept.

He woke at seven. He hadn't remembered to set his alarm. Spike was still out. Xander disengaged himself from the arm thrown over his chest and tucked the blankets around Spike before padding downstairs for a piss. Then he called into work, citing a family emergency and spent about twenty minutes watching a deer out his kitchen window, still entranced by the novelty of it.

For some reason he was loathe to wake up Spike, so he read a little and worked a little and cleaned his bathroom and finally made waffles.

Spike came down shortly thereafter. He looked confused

and Xander found himself blindly throwing explanations at him in hopes one would stick.

“Called in today. Felt like I owed myself a three-day weekend. Did I wake you up? Sorry, I got hungry and well, waffles are kind of my thing on the weekends. Blood’s in the fridge if you’re hungry. I moved a couple packets last night. It should be thawed by now. Here,” he said, pulling a mug from the dish drainer beside the sink and handing it to Spike. “Help yourself.”

Spike blinked at him a moment then shook off whatever stupor he was in and went about nuking himself a mug of blood.

Xander pulled the first waffle from the iron. “You want one?” he asked.

Spike snorted. “Depends. You going to get precious if I cover it in blood?”

Xander rolled his eyes. “It’s your waffle.” And the weird thing was, he could clearly remember the arguments over pizza crust dunked in blood not two years ago, but for some reason, the thought of telling Spike what to do with his food now seemed unbelievably rude. He

wondered if it was a house-proud, wanting-to-be-a-good-host kind of thing or just another sign of his shifted thinking where Spike was concerned.

It just looked like strawberry syrup anyway.

Xander set their places at the table and that was when Spike noticed the flowers. “Harris, mind if I borrow your phone?”

That still irritated him, so clearly he hadn’t completely lost touch with reality. “Am I going to get it back this time?”

Spike glared. “You ever try signing up for phone service without a legal identity and mailing address?”

Xander glared back but he handed him his phone, pretending to be very interested in getting exactly the right amount of butter and syrup into each little square of his waffle. Which wasn’t hard because he actually was. He had a system. Waffles were kind of his thing.

“Nibblet,” Spike greeted. “Your sister there?”

La, la, la, Xander wasn’t listening. Xander wasn’t judging.

Xander wasn't gripping his fork so hard it threatened to bend under the pressure.

"Thought maybe we could—"

The fork slipped and clattered loudly against his plate.

"No, just Harris. It's his phone, came to pick up—"

Xander wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans.

"You know I wouldn't. I *didn't*. I know." Then more quietly. "I know. So tonight?"

Xander pushed his plate away. Feeling tension settling in his jaw he got up in search of the ibuprofen.

"We can stay in. You know I—*Buffy*—" Spike flipped the phone shut angrily.

Xander scraped both plates into the garbage.

Spike soaked in the tub for three hours and even then only got out because Xander was dancing around his bathroom door, pounding to be let in. After his initial irritation passed, though, he had to admit Spike looked

better for his turn for the aquatic. He seemed more relaxed, and relaxed Spike was easier to get along with, he found.

A brief phone call to Buffy after Spike got in the tub confirmed that she was devoting tonight to her sister in some well-intentioned, if short-sighted attempt to make up for being utterly absent for the past several months.

Xander stung on Spike's behalf. "Hey Spike, could I ask you a favor?"

Spike looked up from perusing Xander's bookshelf. "Depends on what it is."

"I've got a bunch of stuff in storage at Anya's. Stuff that was mine when I lived there and stuff that was ours that she didn't want to keep when I moved out. I really don't want to face those boxes by myself." That was a lot more honesty than Xander had planned on.

Spike surprised him, however, and let him keep his dignity. "Oh, I like that. Do one good turn keeping a bloke from being eaten in his own home and he foists his housekeeping off on you in return. That's gratitude for you."

Xander smiled wryly. "Name your price then."

Spike appeared to think it over. "First crack at selling off the kit you don't keep. An' I expect you want me to carry your rubbish back here as well?" Xander shrugged and nodded. Spike wore a feral grin. "Reckon the weekend is long enough for your water heater and I to get better acquainted."

Xander chuckled. "Am I going to be granted the same protection while you're weekending at the Harris Bed and Breakfast?"

"I reckon so."

"Very magnanimous of you."

"Mighty big three dollar word for a man with a library of dime novels and comic books."

"And what year did you matriculate at Oxford again?"

"Sod off."

A half hour later, they sat on the floor of the storage unit

with two large boxes between them. To the right of Xander was the pile of stuff to go to the house. To the left was a larger pile of stuff for Spike to hock or squirrel away in his crypt.

“Mate, what is this?” Spike asked with disdain.

Xander looked up from a collection of old school papers that were quickly thrown in the discard pile. “Hmm?”

Spike was poking at Xander’s pile of stuff to keep with barely concealed disgust. He held up a dog-eared and torn copy of Cosmo from 1999. Xander blushed.

“Throw that out,” Spike chided.

“Anya made us take the relationship quiz in there on our first real date.”

Spike lifted his eyebrow.

Xander glared. “It has sentimental value!”

Spike sighed. “For your own good.”

“What, I can’t keep anything that reminds me of her?”

Spike started shuffling through the pile to keep and chucked out the magazine, a couple pairs of Anya's panties, a naughty board game they'd played once and given up on midway through, ticket stubs from movies they'd seen and was about to toss a blurry picture of the side of her head when Xander's hand reached out and grabbed it away. "Stop! You can't—you can't just make me give her up! I can't just—"

Xander began to hyperventilate and soon registered the sensation of Spike's hand on his back. "Breathe, Xander. Steady on, mate."

Xander listened to Spike's voice and took deep, shuddering breaths until the panic eased.

"What's your favorite memory of Anya?" Spike asked.

Xander flashed to a memory of a blue silk nightgown. "So much of who we were together was me teaching her to be human again," he began, "she didn't realize how much she taught me about being a man. She was money crazy, but if she hadn't been, I don't know that I would have had the discipline to fill out job applications week after week after week. She used to reward me with sex when I turned them in. Of course, she used to reward

taking out the trash and the alarm going off on time and remembering to floss with sex, but still. Sex.”

Spike grinned.

“Anyway, I remember calling her the day I got the construction job. I went to her place and she met me in this blue silk nightgown. She was beautiful. She told me how proud she was. And I told her she should be because I couldn’t have done it without her. Told her she made me a better man. And she started crying and then we had this ridiculous sex with props and costumes and I think she was trying to make it special for me, or something, but I couldn’t keep a straight face—she always came up with these unbelievably convoluted role-play scenarios, you know? But that’s Anya. So, um, that, I guess. That night is my favorite memory.”

Spike’s eyes looked haunted as Xander finished the story. But whatever had been there fled quickly as Spike got to his feet. “Come on,” he said, reaching for Xander’s hand.

Xander gave it to him and was hauled up. Spike turned on his heel and took off up the stairs to Xander and Anya’s old apartment, now just Anya’s. “Spike I already gave her all the keys. She’s not home.”

“Know that, mate.” Spike pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked the door. “Had it made a while back. Just in case.”

Xander stared at him, utterly astonished. “*Just in case?* Just in case of *what?*”

Spike just grinned enigmatically and walked backwards into Anya’s apartment as casual as he pleased.

Before Xander could stop him, Spike was in their old bedroom, purposefully ransacking Anya’s drawers.

“Spike what do you think you’re doing?”

He didn’t answer as he pulled a knife from his pocket. With a flourish he removed the blue silk nightgown of Xander’s memories from Anya’s bureau and cut a strip of fabric off the hem before wadding it up and shoving it back in the drawer. He handed the piece of silk to Xander.

“This is what you want to remember Anya by. Not a tatty old magazine. Let the rest go, mate.”

Xander rubbed the piece of silk between his fingers and he couldn't even bring himself to call him on the breaking and entering. Spike was right.

In the end, they hauled both boxes to the dumpster behind the building. "Best stop off at my crypt on the way back to your place, mate," said Spike.

"Oh yeah? Why is that?"

"No proper liquor at your place, no proper reading material, and it so happens I have both."

"Hustler and Penthouse aren't exactly proper, Spike."

"Neither am I."

Xander laughed at that. He let the car idle while Spike collected his things for the weekend, coming out after a while with a large leather duffle bag that looked like it was filled with a hell of a lot more than a bottle of whiskey and some skin mags.

"Moving in?" Xander quipped.

Spike flipped him off and they drove in silence the rest of

the way.

It turned out the bag was filled with Spike's dirty laundry. Apparently he'd snooped in the bathroom closet looking for porn and discovered the washer and dryer. They were humming away, chewing on twenty or so of Spike's gore encrusted black tee-shirts. Spike's porn mags were fanned out artfully on the back of the toilet. Xander had to give him credit. His tastes were catholic enough to engage Xander's curiosity. Not an easy feat considering he could have held advanced degrees in smut as a teenager.

"Blueboy Spike? Really?"

Spike was lounging in one of Xander's flannel work shirts while his clothes tumbled and made Xander wonder what he ordinarily wore to the Laundromat.

Spike flicked his cigarette into the ashtray on the table with a smirk. "Scandalized, are you?"

Xander rolled his eyes. "Those hentai manga aren't going to get me arrested, are they?"

Spike appeared to think about it. "The lolicon stuff might

get you on a watch list.”

Xander took a swig from the bottle of jack on the table. “Awesome. You know plants make great housewarming gifts. I’ve had a new belt sander on my wishlist since last Christmas. Nothing says happy housewarming like a belt sander.”

Spike actually looked put out. “Those are vintage, mate. Collectors would pay top dollar for them.”

Looking at it from a certain perspective, inarguably a twisted one, he could see the pragmatic thoughtfulness of the gift so Xander conceded his point. “Thank you, Spike.”

“You’re welcome.” And how Spike could will so much expanse into two little words, Xander never knew.

Xander went up to bed a short while later. Down below he heard Spike talking to Buffy on Xander’s phone.

“S’that right? Didn’t have to, love. Could have—yeah. Right then.” The phone clicked shut as the dryer buzzed. Xander listened to the sounds of Spike dressing and the click of the door as Spike answered booty’s call.

Xander couldn't help the sigh of frustration that escaped or the fact that he was now too preoccupied by thoughts of what they were doing to sleep. Angrily kicking off the sheets he stomped back downstairs and shuffled through the pile o' porn for something to clear his mind.

He passed over the bondage and hentai. His was not the mood for whips, little girls or anything with tentacles. He was never in the mood for little girls or tentacles. He picked up the bondage magazine again and flipped through it and set it down again. Far too many ball gags, far too little spanking.

Xander didn't touch the Blueboy.

Irritated he went back to bed, drawing up old memories of Anya. But thinking about Anya now made him think about Spike executing his weirdly therapeutic panty raid. And that brought up feelings about Spike that were confusing and kind of warm and a little bit scary.

Xander gave the Blueboy a wide berth the next morning when he finally woke. He'd slept fitfully at best.

Spike hadn't returned in the night, which wasn't totally

surprising. Xander thought about making breakfast but didn't really feel like going to the effort for just himself, which he belatedly realized was going to be most weekends for the foreseeable future. Spike wasn't a permanent fixture in his house. He was going to have to come to terms with the idea that there weren't going to be long weekends in bed anymore.

Xander wondered if Buffy ever made Spike breakfast in bed. He snorted. Then he chastised himself for being bitter.

Xander stopped arguing with himself after that, realizing how crazy it was and just settled in with his depression and paperwork for the afternoon.

All afternoon he struggled against the impulse to go looking for Spike—to end his suffering and just find out where he was and what kind of shape Buffy had left him in.

Finally after reading the same insurance release form for the seventh time, he accepted defeat and drove to Buffy's house.

Neither Buffy nor Spike were there, but Dawn was—

curled up on the couch and looking a little sniffly and a lot pathetic.

“Why does everyone leave me?” she asked him. Xander didn’t know quite what to say to that. He settled for pulling her into a hug and letting her bawl herself out on his shirt while he wondered where in the hell her sister was.

“Heard you and Buffy had a girls night last night,” he prompted cheerfully.

Dawn let out a bark of laughter that was far too jaded for a fourteen year old. “Yeah it was awesome. We fought most of the night. Finally just watched a movie. I fell asleep halfway through. She went to go meet Spike, I think.”

Xander frowned and pet Dawn’s hair. “You hungry at all?”

Dawn nodded and Xander focused on distracting himself by playing pantry roulette, wondering if one could in fact make a casserole with only canned soup and frozen tater tots. Xander preheated the oven and decided to try it out.

Just after sundown the front door slammed.

“We’re in here!” Dawn called from her perch in the kitchen, a little too relieved for an excuse to stop pushing her soupy tater tots around her plate.

Spike appeared in the doorway, looking somewhat worse for the wear. Xander told himself that it was entirely possible that the new cuts and bruises could have just as easily been the result of a particularly rough patrol, but he didn’t really believe it.

“Where’s Buffy?” Dawn asked.

Spike seemed not to understand the question for a moment. “She’s not here?”

Before Xander could work up a million terrified questions in response to that revelation, the door slammed again and the sound of laughter carried from the front entryway.

Buffy was there. And so was Riley. That was surprising enough in and of itself but then Buffy caught sight of Spike and her expression hardened. “Get out,” she told

him.

Spike glared at Riley. "So that's it, is it?" he asked Buffy.

"Buffy what's going on?" asked Dawn.

"Soldier boy saw a bit more than he bargained for last night," Spike answered.

"And now your sick games are over, Spike," Riley said.

"Oh that's rich, coming from you," he bit back.

"What's he talking about?" asked Dawn.

Xander had to admit he was curious as well. Spike was staring intently at Buffy who was looking anywhere but his face, mottled with bruises.

"Buffy?" Xander asked.

"You're not going to twist her anymore. She's come to her senses and she's not going to let you drag her down—"

"Riley," Buffy interrupted. "Don't."

“He made you do those things, Buffy. You said so yourself. That wasn’t you in there. The Buffy I knew would never—”

“Riley, stop,” said Buffy.

Dawn spoke up, confused. “Riley, Spike is Buffy’s boyfriend now—”

“Dawn,” Xander tried to interrupt.

“—And sex stuff is normal. Spike didn’t make Buffy do anything. They care about each other—”

“Dawnie, stop,” Xander told her as tears began slipping down Buffy’s face. “They’re not talking about sex.”

“Then what—” she began, then turned to Spike as if seeing him for the first time. Her voice was very small and young. “You told me it was *demons*.”

“Was demons, of a sort. But that’s what GI Joe here, don’t understand, is that she *needed* me. Wasn’t anyone else could take her anger, her rage. Not the witch or the Watcher, miles away. Not you, Nibblet—not your fault

she's hurting. Not Xan, her White Knight. But I loved her enough to save her from herself, didn't I? Didn't I do right?"

Xander stood amazed in the face of Spike's righteous fire and the guilty tears coursing freely down Buffy's face. His fists clenched then flexed. With a smile for Spike and Dawn's sake he put a hand on Spike's shoulder and leveled his eyes on Riley, though his words were for Spike.

"Of course you did, Spike. That's what you do for the people you love," he said.

Spike's shoulder relaxed minutely under his hand.
"Thanks, mate."

Riley bristled. "Xander, with all due respect you weren't there. You don't know—"

"Riley," Buffy placed a hand on his arm. "I'll see you before you leave."

Riley, accepting his dismissal, glared at Spike and Xander. Buffy seemed to collapse inward as the door slammed behind him.

“Spike, please go,” she said.

Spike dug in his heels. “Don’t have to pretend anymore, love. Soldier boy is gone.”

Buffy didn’t meet his eyes. “I wasn’t pretending.”

Xander saw the hurt in Spike’s eyes and wished he could take it away, turn back time to the day he caught them together and tell Spike to run, far and fast in the other direction.

“How can you—you *love* me,” he said. Buffy’s lip trembled and Xander winced. “Don’t you?”

“I never said that,” she whispered.

Dawn shrunk back into the wall when Spike let out an inhuman howl of anguish and launched himself at Buffy. Xander reflexively put himself between them and felt Spike’s fist connect with his solar plexus hard enough to knock the wind out of him and the air from the room as Spike backed up, eyes wide and shocked.

“I didn’t mean to,” said Spike, desperately. “I didn’t—”

Xander fished in his pocket for his keys and tossed them to Spike. Pained and slightly breathless he told him, "Go wait in the car. I need to talk to Buffy." Spike stared at the keys dumbly in his hand. Xander stepped closer and put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently. "Don't worry about it. It's what you do for the people you care about, right?"

Spike looked sadly up at him. "Xander—"

"I forgive you. Let me talk to her?" Spike nodded and went to the car. "Dawn, you wanna go sit with him? Make sure he's okay?"

"Yeah," she said. "I can do that."

"Thanks," said Xander. The minute she was gone, he ignored Buffy entirely and opened his phone, pulling up Giles' number in England and dialing.

"Xander, what are you doing?" Buffy asked.

"Hi, Giles, did I wake you?"

"Xander, is everything all right? Is Buffy—"

“Actually, no. Things aren’t all right. But I think I’ll let Buffy tell you about it herself. Here she is,” he said, handing off his phone to her despite her wild-eyed terror. Xander didn’t stay to hear the conversation, closing the front door as Buffy broke down and told her Watcher everything.

Xander knocked on the passenger window of his car and Dawn opened the door. The radio was playing something vaguely depressing.

“Thanks, Dawnie,” he said, pulling her into a hug.

“I feel like I should be thanking you,” she said.

“Buffy’s on the phone with Giles. Go easy on her, Dawn. She’s been through a lot.”

“And the rest of us haven’t?”

“I didn’t say that. Look, I’m going to take Spike home. I’ll swing by for my phone later, okay? Check up on you guys?”

Dawn nodded and with a wave to Spike went back in the

house. Spike climbed into the passenger seat as Xander got in. They made the drive home in silence.

Spike was quiet when they got back. He sat on the couch, smoking and staring out into the woods. Xander didn't really know what he could say to him so he said nothing except for reminding Spike where the blood and towels were and saying goodnight.

He'd just stripped down to his boxers when he heard the crash of broken glass below. He ran down the stairs to see what had happened and found Spike huddled on the bathroom floor, the remains of his mirror shattered around him, covered in Spike's blood. Spike's cradled his shredded fist to him as he rocked back and forth.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Couldn't see myself," Spike explained. "Can see my blood though. Strange, that, isn't it? Can see the reflection of my blood in the glass."

Xander saw the bloody smears in broken mirror images like a gruesome Rorschach test.

"D'you see me, Xander? Am I here?" Spike asked, quietly.

Xander kicked the glass away and squatted beside Spike on the floor, tilting his chin up to meet his eyes. “I see you. You’re here, Spike. You’re here with me. Okay?”

Spike took a shuddering breath and unfurled slightly, hissing as his bloody hand flexed. Xander helped him up and turned on the tap, guiding Spike to the sink. The blood swirled pink in the water as Xander swept up the mess.

He bandaged Spike’s hand and went to bed. This time, he hadn’t yet fallen asleep when Spike appeared. As before, Xander turned down the covers and Spike got in. There was no hesitation, though, as Xander took Spike’s hand under the covers. Spike squeezed it tightly and a moment later, he was in Xander’s arms, crying bitterly into his chest, muttering something that was “Thank you,” and “I’m sorry” and something else lost in the muffled sobbing. When the tears tapered off he couldn’t fight the impulse to kiss the darkest bruise on Spike’s face. Very lightly, he pressed his lips to Spike’s cheekbone and heard the intake of breath as he did so. His hand stroked Spike’s hair gently. Spike’s eyes fluttered shut and then they were kissing.

Spike's full length was pressed to Xander's, legs tangling as they tried to get close, closer. Xander's hands stroked and pressed Spike to him as he tasted and touched and loved. Spike's greedy hands scrabbled for purchase on Xander's back as he bucked and writhed against his body and Xander couldn't remember ever being this hard and feeling this kind of tenderness at the same time. Xander never wanted to stop kissing Spike. It was a hunger and a satisfaction of that same hunger. He trailed his lips over every cut, every bruise, the finger marks around his neck, the boot print on his chest. Then Spike's hand closed around both their pricks and began to stroke and it was all he could do to hold on, his hand joining Spike's, fingers entwining until Spike made a noise that forced Xander to wrap his legs around Spike and surge upwards until his vision went red and he was coming and coming and he thought he might be dying because nothing had ever felt like this before.

Xander woke at dawn, a breeze from the open window across his bare chest dragging him gently and completely into consciousness. Spike was still curled against him, hair awry, lips slightly swollen, and for once the sight didn't fill Xander with despair.

Spike blinked sleepily at him. "Morning," he said,

carefully.

Xander smiled. "Morning."

Spike's answering smile was luminous.

Xander knew they had a lot to talk about. Nothing could stay perfect forever.

"Feel like waffles?" he asked Spike.

"Sounds marvelous, pet."

Xander made waffles.

It was a start, anyway.

The End