

whichclothes presents

Spike Anya Xander



in

Gray
Matters

Image by  sentine

Set during BtVS S4. Xander discovers Spike in an alley, seriously brain-damaged.

Written for vampirebigbang and incorporating the hc_bingo prompt "brain damage". Huge thanks to silk_labyrinth for her beta work, to sentine for the creative banner, and to creepylicious for the mix! Feedback is deeply appreciated.

Grey Matters

by

Whichclothes

Part One

He probably would have ended up Xander's responsibility even if Xander hadn't been the one to find him. After all, they'd pawned him off on Xander before. And besides, Xander was clearly the most expendable of the group, the one who could spend his evenings babysitting instead of patrolling. But Xander wasn't happy about it, and he spent a lot of time glaring angrily at the wreck of a vampire. As for

what Spike's opinions were on the matter, assuming he had any opinions at all, fuck if Xander could tell.

He hadn't been looking for monsters. It had been almost dawn, and he'd been on his way to the morning shift at mind-numbing, humiliating job number...well, he'd lost count. This job mostly involved dragging big, heavy boxes full of paper off shelves, to where a forklift operator could get better access and take them away. It made his back ache and it paid peanuts and he knew he'd only screw it up sooner or later anyway. So he was slogging along dejectedly, looking down at his feet, when he saw something out of the corner of his eye, deep in an alley.

His years in Sunnydale had taught him to act quickly, if nothing else. He'd jumped back and yanked a stake out of his back pocket, prepared to face whatever was coming at him. It took him a moment to realize the thing he'd seen wasn't coming at him at all, wasn't moving a bit, in fact. It was a body, sprawled face-down in the shadows. He groaned. He didn't want to deal with another victim

of demon violence—he'd already seen plenty of those, thanks very much.

But he couldn't just walk away, could he?

So he'd sighed and tucked the stake away and walked into the alley.

He probably should have noticed right away who was lying there. The clothing would have been a dead giveaway—no pun intended. Black duster, black jeans, black Docs. But at first he was too busy trying not to barf to notice, and then he *was* puking, coffee and Pop-Tarts burning his throat and making a mess along the brick wall. Because nobody should have to encounter splattered brain matter before the sun even rose.

Eventually, he had stopped retching and had run a shaky hand across his mouth, and that's when he recognized the corpse. Maybe he should have done a little Snoopy Dance, because this was the homicidal monster who'd tried more than once to kill him and his friends. Except it was hard to hate anyone who'd had their head bashed open like that, even if that someone was Spike.

It had taken him several more minutes to understand that, since Spike wasn't currently a little pile of ashes, he wasn't completely dead, either. An injury like that certainly would have meant a quick end for a human, but apparently a vampire had to lose more than part of his head to be dusted. So then Xander had paced for a few minutes, wondering what the hell to do. If he'd had more time, he probably would have come up with a better plan, one that saved him from vamp-sitting duty. But the sun would be up soon, so he knew if he was going to do anything at all, he had to act right away.

With a mumbled curse and not-so-sad goodbye to yet another job, Xander had rolled Spike over and then hefted the vampire onto his shoulder. Spike flopped loosely, just so much dead weight—another pun not intended—and Xander had carried him back to his basement as quickly as he could. By the time he'd struggled down the stairs and dumped Spike on the unmade bed, his back was screaming in pain. So he'd swallowed a handful of extra-strength Advil—washed it down with cold coffee,

which didn't taste any worse than his mouth—and called Willow.

Willow had arrived an hour later, bringing a sleepy-looking Buffy and Giles with her, and they'd all tactfully ignored the mess he lived in and instead stared down at what was left of Spike. Buffy was the first to move as she pulled out Mr. Pointy. "I never thought it'd be this easy," she said, not sounding very happy.

But Xander had grabbed her wrist before she could use the stake. "Don't," he said. Everybody stared at him then. "It's just...I carried him all the way here, and he was pretty heavy, and I lost another job, and that seems like a waste if you're just gonna dust him."

"So...you want me to wait until he heals and tries to eat you and *then* do it?" Buffy asked. "'Cause I'm thinking that chip's probably sitting in the alley where you found him."

"That's assuming he does mend," Giles said. "I'm not certain what an injury of this type does to a vampire. I expect the...the brain will regenerate, but

I don't know how much of his memory and, erm, personality will be restored."

Willow looked at Giles, wide-eyed. "So you mean, he could just end up...blank? Like a baby? Or like a person with amnesia?"

"Or like a feral demon," Giles said grimly.

That made them all go silent again, but Xander didn't let go of Buffy's wrist, and although she could easily have broken free, she didn't try.

Finally, Xander cleared his throat. "Maybe we can give him some time? I mean, wouldn't the Watchers like to know what happens? It'd be an experiment, sort of." He had no idea why he was suddenly Spike's Great Defender, except the guy had been pretty heavily down on his luck lately and so had Xander, in his own way, and maybe he empathized a little. Besides, he never claimed to be smart.

Everybody had given him doubtful looks, and Giles had cleaned his glasses. But in the end, Buffy had put away her stake and promised to visit Willy's for some human blood, and then they'd left. And

Xander was alone with Spike, who looked really awful.

Swearing at himself, because this was all his own damned fault, Xander had used a couple of damp towels to clean up Spike's shattered skull as best he could. He'd been glad he had nothing left in his stomach but painkillers to throw up. He had sworn some more and pulled off the vampire's clothing; Spike flopped as bonelessly as a rag doll. Xander had seen Spike naked before, a few months earlier when Spike had lived—unlived—in the basement with him. He'd snuck glances then at the tight muscles, the compact but powerful body, the uncut cock. 'Cause guys did that, right? Just for comparison's sake. Spike had caught him at it and smirked. Hell, Spike had probably paraded naked just to torment him. Now, though, Xander could look at that pale, bare flesh all he wanted without anyone giving him smug leers. But Spike looked fragile now. Breakable.

Xander had tucked him into bed.

For four days, Xander had poured blood into Spike's mouth, and Spike had swallowed most of it and ruined Xander's sheets with the rest. For four nights, Xander had slept in his chair—the same chair where he'd once tied Spike—so that his fucking back was *still* hurting. Spike's skull had closed back up again and his scalp had healed, but it wasn't until the fifth day that he moved by himself, and then all he did was open his eyelids and stare blankly at the floor joists above him. He didn't respond to Xander's voice. Even when Xander shook him, Spike just lay there. His mouth fell open a little and pink-tinged drool ran down his chin.

When Xander wasn't glaring at Spike, he talked to him. Not that Spike showed any indication he heard or understood a word, but Xander found it was kind of nice to be able to speak out loud and not have to argue with himself over whether that was a sign of impending insanity, which is what happened when he was alone in the basement. And except for Spike, he was alone almost all the time. Buffy stopped by every couple of days with more blood and Willow had called him twice, but that was it. Of course,

they were both busy with school, and he hadn't been seeing much of them at all lately anyway. Anya came by once, made a face at Spike— "Honestly, Xander, what possible use is a comatose vampire?" —and left.

So Xander fed Spike and wiped his face and talked to him. And even though Xander was still sleeping in the chair and he was still pissed off that he'd ended up saddled with Spike—not to mention beginning to worry about how the hell he was going to make next month's rent—he was finding it harder and harder to be mad *at* Spike. Spike was just all pale skin and empty blue eyes, and if he was conscious at all, he probably was even less happy about ending up this way than Xander was.

Very late in the afternoon a week after Xander had found Spike, two things happened. The first was that his phone rang. "Um, Xander Harris?" the man on the other end asked, stumbling a little over the first name.

"Speaking. But whatever you're selling, I'm not buying."

The man chuckled. “Well, I’m not selling. My name’s Ben Landeros. I’m the foreman at F&J Construction. You filled out a job application with us a few weeks back.”

Xander sat up straight in his chair. “Yeah...um, yes, sir.”

“Are you still available to work?”

Xander glanced at Spike’s inert form. Xander couldn’t just sit down here forever. Tony would be pounding on the door pretty soon. “Yes, definitely available.”

“Can you come in tomorrow for an interview?”

“Sure! I’d be glad to.”

“Okay. We’ll have to make it early, before I leave for the job site. Six-thirty?” He said it like it was a test.

“Six-thirty. No problem. I’ll be there with bells on.”

Xander hung up the phone and grinned.

And that’s when the second thing happened.

Spike opened his eyes again but this time his entire body spasmed. His legs jerked under the sheets and his arms waved weakly around, and then he made this *noise*, this godawful sound like he was choking and howling at once. Xander sprang to his feet, uncertain whether to run to Spike or away from him, and Spike turned his head and actually focused his eyes on Xander. The noise became louder, and that's when Xander realized what it was.

Spike was crying.

For a long, horrible minute, Xander just froze, completely at a loss about what to do. Then he started for the phone, but remembered that Willow and Buffy were in class, and really, what advice could Giles give? The Watchers' Diaries probably didn't cover this sort of situation.

Finally, Xander did the only thing he could think of. He practically ran to the fridge. He'd been keeping Spike's blood in water bottles because the narrow mouths made it easier to feed without spilling too much. He grabbed one of the bottles and brought it over to Spike who, with teary eyes, watched him

move. Spike was still flailing around with absolutely no control of his limbs, a fact that Xander somehow found a little heartbreaking.

Cautiously, Xander sat on the bed. Even more cautiously, he reached for Spike, but Spike didn't do much more than twitch and wail louder when Xander touched his shoulder. So Xander slipped his arm underneath and, as he'd been doing for a week now, levered Spike's head up a little. Then he put the edge of the bottle against Spike's mouth.

The second Spike tasted the first drop of blood, he stopped crying. His arms settled down and his legs stilled, and he began to suck greedily. His wide eyes never strayed from Xander's face.

"Um, Spike?" Xander said, but Spike just kept drinking. "Do you hear me? Can you understand me? Are you aware that I am Nurse Xander, not to be confused with lunch in any way?"

Nothing. Just *swallow, swallow, swallow* and big blue eyes.

When the bottle was almost empty, Spike turned his head away a little. That meant the rest dripped down his neck, onto his chest and the sheets.

Xander set the bottle down and Spike stared at him sleepily. "I kinda feel like I should be burping you or something," Xander said.

Spike blinked very slowly, once then twice, and then his lids stayed closed and his mouth opened. He didn't breathe when he was asleep. It was kind of creepy.

Xander rinsed the empty bottle and dampened a towel, which he used to clean Spike as best he could. Spike didn't wake up.

Xander collapsed back on his chair. "Well, I guess it's a good thing you're sort of back in the world again. More or less. But I really need this job. Assuming I don't blow the interview. And there's nobody I know who can stay with you during the day. Fuck." He rubbed his hands through his hair. "You'll probably be asleep most of the time anyway. Construction guys work during vamp naptime." He had a mental image of Spike waking up in an empty

basement and staggering upstairs to dine on Jessica. Not good. Or finding his way to the door and out into the California sun. Also not good.

Crap. Too bad there were no demon daycares. Or at least vampire-proof playpens.

That last thought sparked an idea. It wasn't a great idea, but it was something. He picked up the phone. "Hey, Giles," he said when the call connected. "You still got those chains that kept Spike in your tub?"

Spike still didn't wake up as Xander attached a cuff around one of his ankles, and then locked the other end of the chain around one of the basement support posts. The posts were strong—he'd reinforced them himself, actually, when he'd moved into the basement and found himself unimpressed with what the builders had done. He just had to hope it would be strong enough to withstand a vampire.

Xander tried to go to sleep early, but it was difficult in the stupid chair. He'd just nodded off in front of the TV when Spike woke up and started thrashing around and crying again. This time Xander didn't

panic. He went straight for the blood. Spike calmed the moment the bottle touched his mouth.

“You look oddly cute like that, you know,” Xander said. Spike did. His hair was all tangled curls, his full lips were pursed around the bottle, his eyes were like something from an anime drawing. One of his hands had caught the edge of the sheet, and he clutched it tightly. His other hand waved around a little until it bumped into Xander, and then Spike grabbed at Xander’s t-shirt and held on.

When the bottle was empty, Spike didn’t fall asleep. He also didn’t seem inclined to let go of Xander and, strangely, Xander wasn’t in the mood to make him. So Xander just sort of slid down the bed until he was lying beside Spike. Spike stared at him gravely.

“Okay,” Xander yawned. “But just for a few minutes. I need my beauty sleep.”

When he opened his eyes again, the first thing he noticed was that Spike was still hanging on tight to him with one hand, and that the thumb from his other hand was stuck firmly in Spike’s mouth.

“Aww,” Xander couldn’t help whispering, and he

really hoped Spike did recover fully, just so Xander could describe the scene in great detail. Repeatedly.

He was going to fall back asleep—he was more comfortable than he'd been in a week—when the tiny little responsible, grown-up part of his brain came fully awake. “Job interview!” Xander said, practically falling out of the bed.

His sudden movement and sound woke Spike, who startled—arms and legs going everywhere—and then began to cry again.

Xander looked at the clock. 5:32 am. “Shit, shit, shit, shit,” he chanted, stumbling over his own feet as he hurried to the fridge. He snatched a bottle of blood, almost spilling it as he ran back to the bed, and then shoved it not very gently into Spike's mouth. Spike didn't seem to mind. He began to drink right away, and he also waved his hand around again until he was once more attached to Xander. “Great. Xander Harris, vampire teddy bear.”

Spike was quiet after he emptied the bottle. With some difficulty, because Spike was still strong, Xander extricated himself from the vampire's grip.

He rushed into his tiny bathroom, shaved and took a lightning-fast shower, then threw on his best clothing. He didn't have a suit, so he hoped a pair of clean khakis, a white button-down shirt, and a red tie were good enough. He ran a quick comb through his hair.

And then he stopped to look at Spike, who was sucking his thumb again and looking back at him.

"I gotta go," Xander said, feeling suddenly guilty. "I'll be back soon, okay? Just, um, get some sleep. Be good."

Spike didn't answer, of course. Xander sighed, gave Spike a little wave, and left.

He arrived outside the F&J office at 6:23. He took a moment to make sure his fly was zipped and his tie was straight, then marched inside.

"Harris?" There was a man seated at a desk. He had a phone receiver tucked between his shoulder and his ear and a set of blueprints rolled out in front of him. He was sort of lanky and probably about fifty

years old, with deeply tanned skin and an almost bald head. He wore a denim shirt, tieless.

“Yes, sir,” Xander said.

“Landeros. Just a sec.”

As Landeros talked loudly with someone about permits, Xander remained standing, looking around the room. It was pretty plain, but there were some photos of various buildings, presumably the firm’s past projects, as well as a couple pictures of the Sunnydale Sluggers Little League team, which F&J apparently sponsored.

“So, Xander Harris,” Landeros said when he hung up the phone. “You want a job in construction.”

“Yeah, I really do.”

Landeros looked down at a sheet of paper that Xander recognized as the application he’d filled out.

“No experience,” the man said.

“Well, no, not formally. But I figure everyone has to start somewhere. I did do a little digging a few months back.” Xander laughed nervously, not

wanting to think about syphilis. “I took shop in school, and I know how to sling a hammer. I’ve been fixing things around the house since I was little.” Because if he hadn’t, the place would have fallen down long ago. He didn’t tell Landeros that, though. “I work hard and I can learn quickly.”

Landeros looked thoughtful. “We just got a new contract, a strip mall out by the highway. But, well, turnover can be pretty high in Sunnydale, and I’m down a few guys.”

“I can start right away.” Xander tried his most winning smile.

Landeros tapped the desk. “Tell you what. We’ll give you a trial period. Two weeks. I’ll pay five hundred a week. If you work out, I’ll take you on regular after that. Seventy-fifty a week plus benefits, as long as there’s work to be done. No vacation, but you get Christmas and New Year's paid.”

Xander’s mind was racing. Seven-fifty a week! With that kind of pay, he could move out of the basement, get a decent apartment, even a car. And

he'd be building things, not flipping burgers or stocking shelves or delivering sandwiches. "Sounds great!" he said.

"Okay." Landeros nodded. "Ground-breaking's day after tomorrow. Be at the site by seven."

"Thanks, Mr. Landeros. You won't regret this." Xander shook his hand and then practically floated home.

He bounced in through the basement entrance and down the stairs. "Hey, Spike," he called. "Xan-Man's gonna bring home the b— Oh, shit!"

Because by then he'd caught sight of Spike, who was huddled on the floor beside the bed, whimpering hoarsely and sucking his thumb. He was still chained to the post. Xander rushed to his side. As soon as Spike saw him, he uncurled from his tight ball and held his arms out and cried.

"Fuck." Without really thinking about it, Xander sank to the floor and scooped Spike into his arms and held him tight. Spike sobbed against Xander's chest while Xander tried to check him over to make

sure he hadn't injured himself. "Shhh," Xander crooned. "It's all right. You're all right. A little falling out of bed doesn't slow down the Big Bad."

Spike clung to him and cried until he was hiccuping and Xander's good shirt was soaked through with tears and demon snot. "I'm gonna get you some blood, okay?" Xander said softly. Of course he got no answer, and when he tried to pull away, Spike clutched him so hard he could barely breathe. So he sat a while longer, humming quietly and rocking their bodies, until Spike fell asleep and his arms loosened their grip.

"This isn't working," Xander said, but quietly, so as not to wake the sleeping vampire. "But what am I gonna do with you? Can't just dump you back in that alley—you'd be toast right away. I could give you to Giles, I guess." Xander pictured Spike chained up in the bathtub again, only this time wailing miserably. Xander was fairly certain that Giles wouldn't be cuddling him back to sleep. "Who would be willing to stay with a 130-year-old demonic infant?"

And then the answer came to him. He sighed and slowly worked his way free of Spike, trying to get to the phone.

Part Two

“We didn’t have sex enough times to owe each other favors this big, Xander.”

“We could...fix that?” he said with a lame grin.

But she gestured at the occupied bed. “I don’t think so.”

“Look, Anya, I know I’m asking a lot here. But I don’t have anywhere else to turn, and—”

“Why do you care, anyway? He’s a vampire. You hate vampires. You’ve said so, many times. And you haven’t been very complimentary about this one in particular.”

“Yeah, I know. But...I don’t know. I found him and I’ve been taking care of him and he’s really helpless....”

“He’s not a puppy, Xander.”

“If he was, I could put him in a kennel or something. Come on, Ahn. Please. You don’t have to do much, just sit and watch TV. He mostly sleeps during the day.”

Spike was awake, and he watched the interchange with his Japanese cartoon eyes, and clearly didn’t have a clue what they were talking about.

Anya had her arms crossed over her chest and her face set in a frown. But she hadn’t gone stomping out of the basement yet, and that was good. “How much are they paying you?” she asked finally.

“Five a week.”

She shook her head. “By the time you pay taxes and rent and your other expenses, you won’t have enough left to pay me.”

“But if it works out, they’ll up my pay to seven-fifty in two weeks.”

She rubbed at her chin, then nodded as if she'd reached a decision. "Here's what we'll do. We're going to rent an apartment together."

"You want to move in with me?" he said, his voice rising an octave or two.

"Two bedrooms. You share one with him," she gestured at Spike, "and the other is mine. You pay the rent. I'm certainly not going to sit in this basement all day, but it won't be so bad in our own place."

He blinked at her, trying to clear his head. "So, let me get this straight. I pay the rent, you babysit, and we're roomies."

"Platonic roommates."

It was a weird plan, but it had its advantages. Getting out of his parents' basement would be really good. Not worrying about Spike all day would be better. He stuck out his hand. "We got a deal."

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Somehow, Willow and Buffy got involved. While they accompanied Anya apartment-hunting, Xander fed Spike, packed up the few belongings worth moving—mostly his tools, some clothing, some comic books and CDs—and tried to quell panicked thoughts about what would happen if he fucked up this job, too. The girls came bouncing down into the basement in the late afternoon, all talking at once, and he was pissed because they woke up Spike who had *just* fallen asleep again; Xander had to hold the vampire mostly in his lap and rock him until he calmed down. Spike clung to Xander, sucked his thumb, and looked at the girls with wide, guileless eyes.

“Wow,” Buffy said, in a much more subdued tone. “That’s...kinda disturbing. But also a little cute.”

Xander sighed heavily. “Yeah. But he’s better, I mean at least a little bit, and that’s a good sign, right?”

“Sure, Xan, that’s great,” said Willow with badly faked enthusiasm.

Buffy chimed in, “By tomorrow he’ll be stealing your stuff and saying weird British things at you and trying to gnaw on your neck.”

Xander looked down at Spike and suppressed an impulse to nuzzle at his hair. “Okay, tell me what you found.”

And they did, sometimes all talking at once. It sounded like a pretty nice place. Two bathrooms, even, which was a big plus, and the rent really wasn’t that much more than the extortionate amount Tony was charging him for the Pit of Despair. Anya had already signed the lease and paid the deposit—“You owe me a thousand dollars, Xander. You can pay it in installments.”—and they could move in the next day.

“I don’t even have any furniture,” Xander said, a little overwhelmed.

“No problem!” Willow said. “My parents have some stuff they’ll never miss, and Buff and I are gonna hit some thrift stores before class tomorrow.”

“I have some furniture, too. I’m willing to share that,” Anya added.

“Thanks, guys. I appreciate it.” And he truly did.

They left shortly after. Xander discovered that after getting up early for the interview, not to mention the vamp-care all day and the packing and stress, he was exhausted. He managed to reach the remote without dislodging Spike, and he clicked on the TV. He fell asleep propped up in bed, with Spike watching him like he was ten times more interesting than the Clint Eastwood flick Xander had found.

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The move itself went more smoothly than he’d expected. Giles showed up just after dark, shook his head over Spike, and somehow managed to cram most of Xander’s stuff in his clown car. While Xander waited for him to return to transport Spike, Xander left Spike asleep under Willow’s watchful eye, and tromped up the stairs.

His parents were slumped in front of the television. He could tell by the watery look in Tony's eyes and the vague expression on Jessica's face that they were both drunk. Not that he expected otherwise. Tony didn't even look up as Xander entered the room, though his mother mumbled something incomprehensible at him.

"I'm moving out," Xander announced loudly.

That got their attention. Jessica gaped a little and Tony frowned. "Wha'?" Tony said.

"Moving out. Already moved, actually. Just thought eventually you might notice I'm not here anymore."

"I'm not refunding you the rest of this month's rent," Tony said.

"I expected nothing else. Drink it in good health."

Tony looked like he might be about to rise out of his easy chair, maybe to aim a swing or two Xander's way, but then he seemed to think better of it, and he collapsed back into his seat. "Better not take any of my stuff with you."

“I’ll leave you your priceless antiques, Dad.”

Tony growled a little and turned his attention back to the boob tube. Xander’s mother, though, was still looking at Xander. “Where will you go?” she asked. She sounded a little like she cared, which was nice.

“Not far, Mom. It’s just...it’s time for me to leave the nest, I guess.”

She nodded and picked up the glass beside her. Clear liquid. So it was vodka night. He stood there awkwardly a few moments more, thinking there was something he should say to them. But nothing came to mind, and in the end he just turned and left.

He tried to get Spike dressed, but Spike was having none of that. He thrashed around and made fussy noises while Willow and Giles watched, bemused. In the end, Xander was out of breath and Spike was just as naked as when they’d begun. “I don’t think he wants clothing on,” Willow said, and Xander shot her a dirty look.

He ended up scooping Spike into his arms again—which Spike seemed pretty happy about—and Giles sort of draped the vampire with a sheet, while Willow carried Spike's clothes. Xander had to carry Spike up the stairs, of course, and with every step he silently prayed that his back would hold out.

Stuffing Spike into the back of the car was also loads of laughs. He yowled and stuck out his arms and legs, and he was still very strong. Xander was about ready to suggest just tying him to the roof when Willow tapped Xander's shoulder. "Why don't you let Giles hold him a sec while you climb in first? I'll bet that works."

Giles made a face. Carrying a bare Spike was probably not high on his to-do list. Spike cried and tried to reach for Xander. But Xander managed to get in the car and then, just as Willow predicted, Spike was more than willing to be jammed in there with him. During the entire ride, which mercifully wasn't very long, Spike hid his face against Xander's chest. Xander could feel Spike's entire body trembling, so he stroked the cool, smooth back and sort of crooned under his breath, even though he

could see Giles giving him strange looks via the rear-view mirror.

The apartment was on the first floor of a stucco building that had probably been built in the 1920s. Xander noted as he entered that there were only seven units. “This is so perfect for you guys!” Willow said as she knocked on the door.

Anya opened up and smiled at them. When Xander tried to walk through, though, he came to a halt. “Oh, for Christ sakes,” he mumbled. “Spike, you are invited in.” Vampire rules were really stupid, he thought, as he carried Spike inside.

They entered straight into the living room. It was cozy, with wood floors and cream-colored walls. He could catch a glimpse of the kitchen through a doorway. “Can you point me toward my room? He’s heavy.”

Anya led the way down a short hall and opened a door, and then Xander saw why Willow had been gushing over the place. The bedroom had a bunch of doors—the one where they stood, another in the opposite wall that looked like it opened into

another hallway, one for a closet, and one for the bathroom. But it had no windows at all. There were also a pair of twin-sized beds with heavy metal frames. Not pretty, but boy did it feel good to set Spike down on one of them, and he was thrilled to realize he wouldn't have to sleep in a chair anymore.

"So? What do you think?" Willow was bouncing up and down on her feet a little.

"It's great, Will, it really is. Perfect." He stretched to work out the ache in his shoulders and arms.

"I'll be labeling my food," Anya said. "Please don't eat it. And I've set aside specific mugs to be used for blood. They're red."

"Red mugs for blood. Got it."

Spike grabbed a handful of blanket and stuffed it in his mouth.

"I wonder if he's teething?" Willow said.

“He’s fully grown, Will. No teething,” Xander said as he gently pulled the bedding away and replaced it with Spike’s thumb.

Giles rolled his eyes. “A vampire with an oral fixation. Color me surprised.”

While Spike seemed momentarily content, Xander took a quick tour of his new home. Anya’s bedroom was bigger than his, and it had a window looking out over a tiny back garden. But her bathroom wasn’t directly connected, like his was. The kitchen was bright and airy, with a big double sink. No dishwasher, but then he mostly ate out of paper bags and cardboard boxes anyway. He opened the fridge and saw half of it was filled with bottles and jars, each bearing a sticker with the letter “A,” and the rest was stuffed with plastic packets of blood.

“Housewarming gift,” Anya said from just behind him, making him startle a little. “The blood, I mean. From Buffy. I don’t think that’s very traditional.”

“Well, Buff’s an untraditional kind of gal. Where is she, anyway?”

“Patrolling. She’s trying to find out who bashed Spike.”

“Oh.” Xander hadn’t actually thought about that. Really, who *didn’t* want to hurt Spike? He was no friend of humans, the Initiative had already nabbed him once, and the local demons had been after him ever since he discovered the chip would allow him to fight them. Xander felt his stomach tighten at the idea of all those parties wishing his vampire harm.

Oh, shit. Xander was in deep trouble.

“Xander? The food will spoil and our electric bill will be very high.”

He realized he was still standing in front of the open fridge, and he shut the door abruptly. “It’s a nice apartment, Anya. You did good.”

She beamed. “It’s a real bargain. There’s storage in the basement, if you ever acquire enough things to need storing. A washer and dryer, too. And I talked the landlord into throwing in three months of cable TV.”

He put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a little squeeze. But then she pulled herself away and frowned at him. “Platonic, remember? When I bring home someone to have sex, I expect you to behave politely.”

That made him wince a little. “Uh, sure. Me, too.”

“I wasn’t aware you had any romantic prospects since I dumped you. Besides, won’t the vampire in your bedroom put a damper on things? Unless someone wants a threesome. If Spike weren’t infantile, I think a threesome with the two of you would be interesting. Or I could just watch you two. That would be good, too.”

“Watch! With—three and—Spike! And.... No. No way.” He tried to marshal a more categorical denial than just an embarrassed splutter, but Anya only shrugged and walked away.

Willow gave him a final hug, and Giles made a few more mumbles that were half congratulatory and half warning, and then they left and Xander was alone with the world’s strangest roommates.

Part Three

Xander had to hoof it to the job site, nearly three miles away. That meant walking through Sunnydale during pre-dawn hours. He carefully did *not* look in any of the alleys he passed, he didn't encounter any mangled vampires or other problems, and he got to work on time.

And he had a really good day.

He'd always been handy with tools. It came naturally to him, Christ knew from where, because Tony couldn't wield a wrench to save his life, and Jessica probably didn't know the difference between a hammer and a two-by-four. In any case, he'd been doing home repairs before he was in first grade. And he liked doing construction work, because he could stop thinking and worrying and babbling and just get into the flow, letting his body do its thing.

He'd never tackled anything as big as building a strip mall, of course, but nails were nails, he figured.

The other guys were mostly willing to show him what to do, and they became more willing when they realized that he picked things up quickly and was prepared to work his butt off. A few of them even chatted with him a little over lunch, which is when he discovered that one of them, a guy named Jay Franklin, lived about three blocks from his new apartment, and Franklin offered to let Xander ride along with him to and from work.

Some of his new co-workers asked him about himself. Xander provided a few details, but of course he had to be a little evasive about certain things. Like being buddies with a Slayer and a witch, or his years spent patrolling cemeteries, or playing single parent to a brain-damaged vampire.

By the end of the day, Xander was sore and sweaty and really wiped, not to mention preoccupied with thoughts of how Spike and Anya's day had gone. But Landeros made a point of slapping him on the back and saying, "Well done, Harris. Keep it up and the job's definitely yours." So Xander felt pretty damn happy as Franklin dropped him off in front of his building.

He was actually a little afraid to enter the apartment. At least the place was still standing.

But things were pretty peaceful inside. Anya was sitting on the couch, eating apple slices and watching MSNBC. Xander grunted a greeting to her and ran past to check on Spike. Spike had kicked the covers off and was curled on his side, sucking his thumb again. He had some fabric clutched in one hand. His eyes lit up when he saw Xander and he reached out and smiled. It was the first time he'd smiled since he was brained.

Xander sat beside him on the bed, and Spike squirmed close and inhaled deeply and with much satisfaction. Xander stroked the vampire's hair.

Anya appeared in the doorway a moment later. "You didn't get fired?"

"Not yet. How'd it go around here?"

"He cried for a while after you left. So I gave him your t-shirt from yesterday, because I thought it might soothe him. It did. I fed him twice, but mostly he slept."

“My dirty laundry made him stop crying? Usually it has the opposite effect on people.”

She rolled her eyes. “It was your scent, dummy. Demons are big on scent.”

“Oh.” It occurred to him then that Anya might have been a particularly apt choice for a babysitter.

“Well, thanks.”

“I’m going out now.”

“Yeah? Where to?”

“The Bronze, I think. I feel like dancing, maybe meeting someone.”

Xander felt a twinge of regret over his lost social life. “Have fun.”

The apartment seemed very quiet after she was gone. Xander propped Spike up on some pillows and gave him some blood. Spike’s eyes never left Xander’s face as he fed. For his part, Xander noticed that Spike’s body wasn’t quite as floppy as it had been, that the vampire was actually supporting himself upright a little. He also noticed that Spike

was dirty. Spike didn't seem to sweat, and of course he was missing most other human bodily functions as well. But still, grime had settled in the creases of his skin, and the swipes of a damp towel Xander had been giving him hadn't eliminated all the bits of dried blood. And Spike's hair was a snarled mess that threatened to morph into dreadlocks any moment.

"Hey, I don't feel sorry for myself. Who cares if my friends and former girlfriend get to spend their evening dancing or chasing nasties or doing other exciting, grown-up stuff? I get to bathe a vampire. Lucky me."

He wasn't sure what temperature of water to use. Did the cold-blooded set prefer their baths hotter or cooler than the living tended to? He decided on going slightly towards the warm side, figuring that at least he didn't have to worry about scalding Spike. Probably.

Xander's poor, abused back protested as he lifted Spike again. "I hope you learn to crawl soon," he said as he carried Spike into the bathroom. "Or

maybe not. I have no clue how to vamp-proof an apartment.”

Getting Spike into the tub was a lot like trying to bathe a cat. He squawked and struggled—once Xander was fairly certain he actually hissed—and by the time Spike was finally sitting in the waist-deep water, Xander was almost as wet as he was. But then Spike blinked at the water and waved his hands around a little, splashing, and finally relaxed. Xander was again reminded of a cat as he ran the soap and washcloth over Spike’s milky skin and Spike pushed up a little to meet the pressure and practically purred.

“See? I knew you’d like this. I wonder when’s the last time you took a bath? I mean, aside from the bondage deal in Giles’s tub. I don’t think most of the places you’ve stayed in have amenities like plumbing.”

As always, Spike clearly didn’t understand a word, but he seemed to like to listen to Xander babble, and when Xander held up a soap bubble and blew it towards Spike, Spike grabbed clumsily for it and

actually laughed in delight when it popped. Xander couldn't help but laugh, too.

He continued scrubbing gently until the obvious happened and he got to Spike's groin. Xander had seen a whole lot of naked Spike recently. But he had been able to avoid touching Spike's, uh, more intimate parts. Until now. With an aggrieved sigh, Xander very carefully ran the washcloth over Spike's penis and scrotum. Spike looked down in some surprise as Xander did so, as if the vampire hadn't up until that point been aware that he possessed those parts. But when he made a funny little whining noise and Xander felt the flesh beneath his hand begin to grow firmer, Xander snatched his hand away as quickly as if he'd been bitten.

"Uh, no. Not going to.... That's so deeply disturbing in so many ways I can't even count them." Not the least disturbing of which was his sudden urge to keep on with the naughty touching. Spike whined again.

"Time for a shampoo! Yes, definitely time for a shampoo."

Spike was less sanguine about that part. He refused to let Xander duck his head under—“But you don’t need to breathe, Fangless!”—so Xander ended up having to pour cupfuls of water over the indignant vampire’s head. Spike splashed around a lot, further soaking Xander, and Xander practically had to climb into the tub with him to finish the job, but at last Spike’s hair was wet enough. Spike liked the actual shampooing part much better. He seemed to enjoy the feeling of Xander’s fingers on his scalp. Xander sculpted Spike’s sudsy hair into devil horns and wished he had a camera. He laughed so hard he was snorting, and then laughed even harder when Spike *giggled* along with him.

Rinsing the shampoo out involved more trauma.

By the time Spike was dried and combed and tucked into bed, Xander’s dirty t-shirt in his hand and thumb once again firmly in his mouth, Xander was almost staggering from exhaustion. He stripped off his damp clothing and climbed into bed, and he was asleep almost instantly.

~*~*~*~*~

Even a strange life could become routine, it seemed.

For two weeks, Xander got up early and fed Spike and got dressed and hitched a ride with Franklin and hammered and sawed and carried things around and then got a ride home and checked in with Anya and hugged Spike and showered and fed Spike and gave Spike a bath and found ways to entertain the increasingly interactive vampire and fed him again and then collapsed into bed.

Sometimes it wasn't until his eyes had closed that he realized that he'd forgotten to eat any dinner himself.

Weekends were for chores. He did his laundry. He cleaned the apartment. He went to the grocery store for food for him, and then by Willy's for blood for Spike. He bought Spike some sweatpants and a couple t-shirts and had a long and protracted and sweaty battle getting them on the struggling

demon. Xander won the battle, but Spike sulked about it.

In short, Xander went through his life in a haze of exhaustion.

The thing was, though, he wasn't miserable. Partly that was because he knew he was doing well at work, and it gave him a real high to have others appreciate him for a change. And partly it was because when he'd get home in the evening, Spike would obviously be delighted to see him, smiling and laughing and making strange babbling noises that were almost words. Nobody had ever been that glad to see Xander before.

Xander didn't encounter Anya very often. She was still sleeping when he left. She'd be there when he got home, of course, but she usually left soon afterwards. She was taking business classes at night. And on weekends, she locked herself in her own room because she'd taken on some kind of work-from-home telemarketing job. She went out to the Bronze sometimes, too, but if she ever brought anyone home, Xander didn't see him.

He was too busy to care that he wasn't hearing much from Willow and Buffy either. Willow called a couple of times, and that was it. Apparently Buffy was busy with a new boyfriend and Willow had been spending most of her spare time practicing her magic. If Buffy had found out who attacked Spike, she hadn't shared that information with Willow, and she didn't pass it on to Xander either.

At the end of the second week at the new job, Landeros pulled Xander aside, shook his hand heartily, and informed him that the position and the raise and benefits were formally his. "You keep up the good work, and you'll move up to supervisor in no time at all, Xander." Xander smiled so widely he was a little afraid the top of his head would fall off.

The others gathered round to congratulate him and welcome him to the team. "Hey," Franklin said, "how about if we go out and celebrate? We can catch happy hour at Dave's, you can come hang out with me and some of my buds after."

"Thanks," Xander replied with real regret. "But I gotta get home."

“Got a ball and chain waiting for you?” asked Phillips, a short guy with a shaved head.

“Nope. Still blissfully single. But I have....” Shit. How to explain what he had? “There’s this old, um, friend. He got hurt really, really badly, and I take care of him. My roommate’s on duty while I’m here, but the rest of the time, he’s all mine.”

“Man, you must be pretty good friends,” said Phillips.

Xander winced a little. “Um...not really. I mean, we weren’t. But he didn’t have anyone else.”

The other guys shook their heads, probably trying to decide whether he was crazy or just a great big dupe.

Franklin did insist on stopping at Rocky’s BBQ on the way home, and buying Xander a half rack of baby back ribs with all the fixings. He offered to buy dinner for Spike, too, but Xander explained that his friend was on a liquid diet. The food smelled wonderful as it warmed Xander’s lap through the paper bag.

Anya was waiting anxiously for him when he got home. “Spike’s been restless and a little cranky all day and you’re late and I have a date!” she said, all in one breath, before she started for the door.

“Hey! Wait! Can’t you just deal with him a few more minutes while I eat?”

She crossed her arms. “Our agreement was that I watch him while you’re at work. You’re not at work anymore.”

“But—”

“I have a *date*, Xander. He’s a very handsome law student and his hands are almost as big as yours, which probably means his penis is large, too.”

Xander blushed a little. “Fine. Go. Have enough sex for the both of us, because Zeus knows I’m never getting any again.”

She sort of snorted at him, and then she left.

Xander put the food down on the coffee table and almost tiptoed into his bedroom. Spike’s eyes were red and watery-looking, and he’d somehow

managed to pull his t-shirt most of the way off, so that it was bunched around his neck like a scarf. But he'd obviously heard Xander's voice and been waiting for him, because Spike was sitting up in bed, holding his arms out and speaking his almost-words.

Xander sighed and sank to the mattress beside him. Spike immediately plastered himself to Xander.

"Hey, Fangless, had a hard day? I'm sorry. It's gotta suck, being cooped up in here all the time. But I have good news. I'm official now with F&J, which means I can continue to keep you in the style to which you've become accustomed. The Xan-Man is now officially a company man."

Spike pulled his head away from Xander's neck and looked at him with a little frown.

"What's the matter, Spike?"

Spike licked his lips and then, in a hoarse, tiny version of his usual baritone, said, "Xan?"

Part Four

“Well, I expect that it’s a good thing he's showing signs of recovery, but you really must be cautious. He could turn on you at any time.”

Xander licked barbecue sauce off a finger and attempted to arrange Spike slightly more comfortably across his lap. “Thanks, Giles, but he doesn’t look very turny right now.” In fact, Spike seemed pretty disturbed by whatever fragments of memories had surfaced in his jumbled brain, and he had himself plastered to Xander very solidly. Thus the eating ribs in bed while talking on the phone, a combination that was sure to end in disaster.

Giles sighed loudly. “He was never particularly stable in the best of circumstances, Xander, and now—”

“What do you want me to do? Say, ‘Hey, you can say one whole word, you’re much better now,’ and dump him back in the street? Stake him, now that

he's with it enough to know what's going on and be afraid?"

"Of course not. It's just that I fear you're becoming quite...emotionally attached. And this is Spike, remember. A vampire."

"Yeah, I'm pretty much reminded of that when I pour blood down his throat several times a day. And how could I *not* get emotionally attached? I've been with him all the time, doing everything for him, and—" His voice had risen enough that Spike had become alarmed, and was now squashing him even more and shaking. Xander took a deep breath and let it out. Much more quietly, he said, "I'm not gonna dump him, Giles."

"I know. And I'm sorry. Only...do be careful, Xander. Please."

Xander understood that Giles was expressing genuine concern for him, and most of his anger evaporated. "I'll do what I can. Just, I'm probably gonna end up vamp chow one way or the other, the way my life goes. I'd rather it happen when I know

I'm doing the right thing, than just some random monster getting lucky one day."

"I understand," Giles said.

Xander hung up shortly afterward. Spike peeled himself away slightly and looked up at him. Xander scraped a glob of barbecue sauce off Spike's shoulder with one finger, but before he could get rid of it, Spike leaned forward and took Xander's finger into his mouth.

Xander wasn't sure which of them was more shocked: Spike, who was probably expecting the red stuff to be blood and not Rocky's Extra-Spicy, or Xander, who was instantly certain he was about to lose his nail-gun trigger finger.

They both froze.

And then Spike began sucking avidly, his brow creased in concentration, at which point Xander became instantly and very uncomfortably hard.

"Uh, don't!" Xander said, and slid his finger out of Spike's mouth with a loud *pop*. Spike whined. "I'm

not edible.” Xander’s voice came out a little more desperate than he’d planned.

When Spike submitted him to a major case of puppy-dog eyes, Xander shook his head. “No eating Xander!” But then he reached over to his plate and picked up a rib, and he handed that to Spike instead.

Spike immediately stuck the thing in his mouth and began to gnaw on it. Sauce became smeared all over his face and, when he slapped happily at the bedding, the sheets as well. Some of it splattered on Xander. They were both going to need bathing, and it looked like Xander was going to have to do another load of laundry. But he didn’t mind too much, not really, because Spike was smiling kind of goofily around the bone and obviously having a fine time indeed. As for Xander’s erection, he ignored it into submission.

~*~*~*~*~

He was awakened the next morning by a loud thump. He shot upright in bed, crying out, “Wha’?”

Spike was on the floor between the beds, trying unsuccessfully to sit up. His face and hands were bloody. “Xan,” he said. He looked frightened.

Xander got tangled up in the blankets as he tried to scramble out of bed, but managed to free himself before he fell, too. He knelt beside Spike and pulled him up, checking him over for wounds. “What’s the matter, Spike? What happened?”

“Xan...Xan....” Spike seemed to be struggling to find words. And then, as Xander continued to examine him for injuries, Spike’s face shifted and he was all bumps and glittering fangs. He shoved his hand clumsily toward his mouth and ended up cutting a pretty deep slash across the top of his finger. “Xan,” he said again, this time a little mournfully.

Xander felt his racing heart slow a little. He gently pulled Spike’s hand away from his mouth. “It’s okay, Spike. It’s just your other face. You’re a vampire, remember? The Big Bad.”

Spike didn't look comforted. "Bad?" he whispered. And then, more loudly, "Bad!" He pushed himself clumsily away from Xander and buried his face in his hands. He began to sob.

"Oh, shit, Spike. I didn't mean.... You're not bad, okay? You're good." He tried to draw Spike into his arms.

But Spike twisted away. He lifted his head up, his golden eyes all teary. "No, Xan. Bad. Bad." And he fell over on his side and began to cry even harder.

Xander didn't understand why Spike was so upset. He did the only thing he could think of, which was to tug Spike upwards again and force him into an embrace. He never thought he'd be desperately clutching a demon to himself, but here he was, and after a moment Spike's stiff body loosened, and the vampire slumped heavily against him. Xander rubbed his back and sort of hummed at him.

Eventually, the storm blew over. "Hey," Xander said into Spike's ear. "I'll bet you're hungry. And maybe a tiny change of scenery is in order."

Spike still couldn't stand, let alone walk. So Xander carried him into the living room and set him down on the couch. There was no sign of Anya; either she was still zonked out, or else she'd got lucky the night before. As Spike looked around himself curiously, Xander went into the kitchen and got a bottle of blood and a glass of OJ. He helped Spike drink his first. Spike could hold the bottle now, but tended to lose his grip or slosh things around, and Anya would not be pleased if A-Pos ended up on her sofa. The blood successfully downed, Xander plopped down beside Spike and pulled a fluffy white throw over them both. Spike stroked the soft material with one hand and then leaned against Xander and sighed.

“Yeah, I know. Probably this wouldn't be your first choice in accommodations. Keep up the healing, though, and you'll be back on your own soon enough.” Oddly, saying those words left a tight, bitter feeling in Xander's chest. He shook his head and picked up the remote.

They watched TV most of the day. Spike didn't seem to care what was on. Movies, sci-fi, commercials—

whatever it was, he watched, his mouth hanging slightly open and his eyeballs moving back and forth. Xander felt as if they were both melting into the couch. But it wasn't so bad, really, to have a lazy day, considering what his life had been like lately.

At lunchtime, Spike had more blood and Xander made himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Spike seemed to want to try some, so Xander gave him a piece. Spike made a horrible face—which made Xander snort with laughter—and spit it out. On the other hand, Spike crunched happily, if messily, on several of Xander's potato chips. Xander was going to have to vacuum the couch cushions if he didn't want Anya wreaking vengeance on him.

Sometime deep in the afternoon, when Xander was most of the way into a catatonic stupor and Spike was sort of draped across him, the phone rang. Xander ignored it and it stopped. But then it started again and he groaned, because he could see the handset sitting on a chair, out of reach. Of course, by the time he'd dislodged Spike, who grumbled wordlessly over it, and made his way across the

room, the ringing had stopped again. It started up for the third time just as he'd turned to head back to the couch.

"What!" he said into the receiver, probably a lot more nastily than necessary.

"Somebody got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning."

"Sorry, Buff. It's been a rough couple of weeks."

She made a sympathetic noise. "I know. If you want me to take him off your hands—"

"And do what with him?"

"I don't know. I can't really keep him in the dorm. Maybe my Mom's house?" She didn't sound very certain at all about it.

"Look, Buff, it's okay. I'm getting some rest today and it's cool. Besides, he's getting better."

There was a brief silence on the other end. "Yeah. Giles said. Are you sure you're...safe?"

Xander glanced over at Spike, who had his thumb in his mouth once more, and his eyes glued to Rachel Ray. “Yeah, I’m good.” He sighed. “Hey, Will says you have a new squeeze.”

She giggled. “I kinda do. He’s this guy from school. He’s sweet and a little dorky and really hot and he’s *normal*, Xan. Like, aw shucks, golly gee, apple pie normal.”

“That’s great,” he said, and he meant it. He wasn’t sure he’d recognize normal if it bit him on the ass.

“So,” she said in a more businesslike tone, “I actually called to tell you I got some info on who brained Spike.”

Xander winced. “Yeah?”

“Humans. There’s a gang of ‘em who’ve caught onto the whole Hellmouth thingy, and they’re sort of vigilantes. But I don’t think they have a clue what to do about demons, or they’d have done something a little more terminally fatal to Spike. I’m thinking I should go have a talk with them, tell them to butt out before something eats them.”

Xander wanted to do a lot more than talk to them.
“Buffy, they attacked a helpless...um, vampire.”

“You do realize how strange that sentence was, don’t you? How were they supposed to know he was chipped? Besides, it’s Spike. He makes even people who don’t know he’s a vamp want to hit him.”

“Yeah, but still...if you find out who they are, let me know, okay? At least then I can warn Spike to steer clear of them, once he’s back on his own.”

She was very silent for a long minute. “Xan...his chip is gone. If he goes back to his old Spikish ways, I can’t let him hang around draining the locals.”

“You can’t just stake him!” Spike looked up in alarm at the panic in Xander’s voice. Xander tried to smile reassuringly at him.

“Xander, he’s a vampire, and I’m the Slayer. It’s a thing. I know you...you’ve been taking good care of him. But I can’t ignore homicide.”

Xander knew that was true. Hell, he couldn’t just ignore homicide, either. But still....

At the other end of the line, Buffy sighed. “Look, I gotta book. We’ll figure something out later, if it comes to it, okay?”

“Okay. ‘Bye, Buff.”

He had just settled back onto the couch again, this time with the phone close by, and once again with a Spike blanket, when the front door opened and Anya came in. She looked very self-satisfied, but she raised an eyebrow at them. “You two look awfully cozy.”

“Hey, Ahn. We’re couch potatoes today. I guess the date went well, huh?”

She smiled. “Mark is very nice. We had an expensive dinner and we went to his house and had sex. He has a large penis, but he’s not as talented at sex as you are.”

Xander blushed. “Uh, thanks, I guess.”

She sort of shrugged, then walked on into her room.

The thing about sitting around like a slug all day was that it was exhausting. So it was fairly early still

when Xander clicked off the TV and carried Spike back into their room. Xander tucked him in and tried to go to sleep himself, but he could hear Spike tossing and turning restlessly, mumbling little sounds that were almost words, whining a little with frustration. Finally, Xander clicked the light back on. “Not sleepy?” he asked.

“Xan,” Spike said, which wasn’t really an answer to the question.

Xander had a flash of inspiration. He grabbed a graphic novel from the small shelf between their beds and took it over to Spike’s bed. Xander sprawled out on the mattress with Spike pressed close to him, and Xander read the book out loud. It was the fourth in the *Sandman* series. Spike listened carefully, although he probably didn’t understand more than a tiny bit, and he looked intently at the pictures. Xander got most of the way through the book before he was yawning too much to go on. By then, at least, Spike seemed more settled, and when Xander returned to his own side of the room and turned off the light, all was quiet.

All was quiet, that is, until the wee hours of the morning, when a shriek and a *thud* sounded in the pitch darkness of the room. Once again, Xander struggled to consciousness and tried to find the light switch.

Spike was on the floor again, rocking himself and crying. He wasn't bloody this time, at least. Xander knelt beside him. "What is it, Spike?"

"Bad!" Spike wailed, and flung himself against Xander.

Just then the door flew open. Anya was wearing a slinky little red nightgown, her hair was a mess and she looked pissed. "What's going on here?" she demanded.

"I think he might have had a nightmare."

"He's very noisy. The neighbors are going to complain."

"He's scared, Anya. Imagine all the nasty things he probably has to dream about."

"Well, keep him quiet."

“I’ll try.”

She stomped out again.

Xander eventually got Spike calmed, and then tried to get Spike back into bed. But Spike refused to go. He struggled so much that Xander almost dropped him, and after a few minutes of fruitless efforts, Xander put him back on the floor. “What? What is it you want?”

Spike looked up at him. “Want Xan.”

Oh. Crap.

Xander looked back and forth between the beds. They weren’t big enough for two. With a heavy sigh, he scooted Spike out of the way, and then manhandled his own bed up against Spike’s. Nothing like furniture moving in the middle of the night. But at least Spike seemed to realize what was going on, and he didn’t fight Xander when Xander hauled him back onto the mattress. The second Xander lay down beside him, Spike flung an arm around Xander’s middle and made a quiet, contented noise that let Xander know this was

probably going to be a semi-permanent sleeping arrangement.

Xander almost admitted to himself that that was pretty okay with him.

Part Five

Willow had once tried to explain to him how time was relative. It had made his head hurt. But now he kind of got it because, while previously big chunks of his life had seemed to crawl by, now the days flew past.

Work was going really, really well. He hardly even had to think about what to do—he just got it. He imagined that was how Buffy must feel when she was fighting a monster, or Willow when she was hacking into someone's computer system. It wasn't just that he was good at slinging a hammer, either. He instinctively understood why a certain beam had to go in a certain place, he always knew exactly

what kind of screw to use, or exactly how much putty was enough.

Being competent—no, more than competent. Being *accomplished* at something, earning the respect of his co-workers...it felt fucking fantastic. The whole time he was on site, it was like he was on some kind of wonderful drug, one that made him feel floaty and confident and strong and happy.

The other guys were great. One or two grumbled—they thought he was sucking up, or maybe making them look bad—but most of them appreciated his skills, and they knew he was more than willing to carry his own weight. Landeros quickly began trusting him with trickier parts, and a few of the other workers began trying to get Xander as their work partner.

Jay Franklin was one of those. Of course, they got to know each other a little better anyway since they carpooled, but Jay seemed to like Xander a lot. While they worked, Jay talked about his life. He grew up in Wisconsin and had moved to Sunnydale a few years back. He was engaged to a girl named

Bailey who worked in the Safeway bakery, he was saving his pay to buy a house, and he was a big Green Bay Packers fan.

Xander had to be careful what he disclosed about himself in return, which made him feel crappy and dishonest. Especially when Jay kept inviting him to come hang out after work, and Xander kept having to decline.

“So what’s the deal with your sick friend? You can’t leave him for even a couple of hours? I mean, my place is only a couple of blocks away.”

“No, I really can’t. He’s pretty...incapacitated.”

“What happened to him?” As they had this conversation, they were sitting on a half-built wall and eating sandwiches. Jay took a big bite of his.

“He, uh, he had a traumatic brain injury.”

“Man, that’s rough. Don’t they have, I don’t know...homes for people like that? Rehab centers? Hospices?”

Xander's turkey on wheat tasted very dry. "I guess. But I don't think they'd be able to handle Spike's, uh, special needs very well. Besides, he doesn't have any money."

"Spike?" Jay raised his eyebrows.

"Yeah. It's a nickname."

Jay snorted. "I hope so!" He ate the last of his sandwich and stuffed the wrapper into his lunch bag. "Well, maybe you can get a sort of babysitter one of these days. What do they call it? Respite care. Yeah. My gram got that when gramps was dying from Alzheimer's. And then you can come hang out."

Xander thought finding vampire respite care was highly unlikely, but he nodded. "Thanks, man. I appreciate it."

Xander had never really had any guy friends to pal around with. There had been Jesse, of course, but even then Willow had been there, and although Willow was wonderful and his BFF, she was

definitely not a guy. He sort of wondered what the Y-chromosome set did with no girls around. Watch sports? Drink beer and belch a lot? Tell fart jokes and talk about pussy? The thing was, although masculine company would be nice, none of those options sounded all that attractive to him.

Especially since his time in Oxnard and a few of his recent experiences with Spike had left him with the suspicion that he was more interested in male anatomy than female. Which was just peachy, really, and he was almost thankful he was too busy with Spike and work to have a full-blown sexual orientation crisis.

Construction came easily to him, but Spike care was a little tougher. There were no instruction manuals for nursing a demon. And it didn't help that Spike's needs changed from day to day as he slowly healed.

About a month after they moved into the new apartment, Spike learned to crawl. In a way, that was good: Xander didn't have to carry him around anymore. But it was also challenging, because Spike was restless and curious. He got into everything, and he was fast. One evening, Xander left him on

the couch, seemingly watching something with car chases on TV, so that Xander could take a quick shower. He couldn't have been gone for more than five minutes. But when he emerged from the bathroom, Spike was in the kitchen, a half-dozen mangled bags of blood scattered around him. The puddles and splashes of gore were everywhere—on Spike, on the floor and walls, on the cabinets and fridge and table. And they were sprinkled with something else, which Xander discovered to his disgust was Rice Krispies.

“Want eat,” Spike said, grinning redly, obviously pleased with himself.

Xander didn't yell. At least, not out loud. Instead, he yanked off Spike's clothing—much to the delight of the vampire, who wasn't all that fond of being dressed anyway—and plopped him in the tub, where he hoped Spike could splash away in peace for a while as Xander scrubbed. At least he didn't have to worry about Spike drowning in the bath.

He managed to get almost all the bloodstains out.

A week or so after that, Spike snuck into Anya's room and went rooting through her dresser drawers. He didn't damage anything, but Xander figured Anya would not have been pleased to know that Spike had been fondling her undies.

It was a good thing that they were sharing a bed, and that Spike insisted on sleeping scrunched close against Xander. Although it meant Xander didn't even get to jerk off—and he was possibly going to die from unrelieved sexual frustration—it also ensured Spike couldn't creep away in the middle of the night without waking him.

Just as he was taking his first, shaky steps across the apartment, Spike's vocabulary was growing as well. He mostly used it to demand things with his old accent restored. "Xan, want eat." "Xan, want TV." "Xan, want clothes off." Or, most simply, "Want Xan." He'd say that last phrase when he was distressed over things; when he was frustrated over his body's unwillingness to follow his desires; when, Xander suspected, memories of his past clawed their way into his consciousness. Xander didn't

mind being a security blanket. Like his construction job, it made him feel useful.

Xander was pretty certain that Spike had a lot more going on upstairs now. Sometimes Xander would catch the vampire watching him with an expression that was almost familiar from the old days, maybe with his head cocked a little and his eyes narrowed. Xander wondered when Spike was going to remember that they hated each other, and whether Xander was going to survive that recollection.

Xander was also pretty certain that there were some things Spike was now perfectly capable of doing by himself, but which he insisted that Xander do for him. Bathing, for instance. Spike might or might not have been able get the taps going himself, but he could have managed the towel and soap parts. He wouldn't, though. If Xander tried to hand him the washcloth, Spike only sat there, pouting slightly, and said, "Xan wash."

Honestly, Xander didn't mind the baths. They were kind of relaxing for both of them, and Spike seemed to listen as Xander babbled on about his day. But it

was during a bath one evening, as Xander scrubbed at Spike's torso and told Spike about an incident that morning when Delgadillo spilled five gallons of white paint over a roll of new carpeting, that Spike made a soft noise, and Xander realized that the vampire's cock had grown fully erect.

Xander froze, his eyes meeting Spike's. "Spike—" Xander said.

Spike wrapped a hand around Xander's wrist and moved Xander's hand down to his crotch. "Want Xan," he said. "Please."

Oh gods, Xander was badly tempted. Because Spike was beautiful and...and *needy* and, Xander had to admit, even before the attack Spike had had an air of mixed danger and vulnerability that made Xander's stomach knot and his chest feel tight. And Spike's eyes were so bright and blue, like glacial pools, and his lips were slightly parted, and the reddened tip of his cock was bouncing in the water in a way that made Xander think of bobbing for apples, and that made him want to taste.

Xander stumbled clumsily to his feet and lurched back against the wall. “No. No, ‘cause that would be wrong and someday you’d be really angry about it and I could never forgive myself, and...just no.”

Spike ducked his head, then looked up. “Bad?” he asked.

“No, you’re not bad. Just...confused, and I guess a little horny. God knows I’ve made some awful decisions in partners under similar conditions.”

Spike only frowned at him, not understanding.

With a heavy sigh that made him feel like he was eighty years old, Xander sat down on the closed toilet. “Look, sometimes a guy gets, um, in a mood and he wants, wants some relief.” Christ, he was explaining the birds and the bees to a 150-year-old demon. Badly. “So he finds someone he’s compatible with. Like maybe a pretty and more-than-slightly insane girl vampire. And so they get together, and, uh....”

Spike's eyebrow had gone up, the one with the scar. Xander slumped in defeat. "It's just a really bad idea, Spike."

"No. *Good*. Want Xander. Want...want *good*." Spike growled in frustration and banged his head back against the tub.

"Hey! We've had enough with the head injuries already." Xander stood, took the towel off the rack, and held it out. "C'mon. I'll crumble some Ritz into your blood and read you some more *Watchmen*."

Spike perked up a little at that. He stood and climbed out of the tub, and Xander helped dry him. Spike refused to put on his clothing, though. And from the sad glances he was giving his still half-hard cock, Xander had the feeling they were going to be revisiting this subject again in the future.

~*~*~*~*~

At work the next day, Xander kept getting distracted, thinking of the way Spike had looked in

the bathtub, of the way Spike had pleaded with him to touch. Fortunately, his distraction didn't affect the job he was doing—sealing concrete—which was fairly mindless in general. But it did mean that Jay had to call his name several times to get his attention.

“Xander! You in there, man?”

Xander shook himself from his reverie. “Sorry. Just have some stuff on my mind.”

“No prob. It's lunchtime anyway. Want to come with? I'm thinking taco truck.”

Xander had brought another turkey sandwich, but a burrito or something sounded a lot better. “Sure. Just let me finish cleaning up.”

Ten minutes later, he was climbing into the cab of Jay's Ford. There was a taco truck that parked itself near the job site, but everyone knew that the best one was Tacos Michoacan, which set up a few miles away, in between a car wash and a Valero gas station. That was where Jay took them.

Xander ordered a carne asada burrito and a bottle of Mexican Coke, and Jay got some fish tacos and a Jarritos. They took their paper plates over to one of the plastic picnic tables under the green canopy and they both dug into their lunch with gusto. Jay was a pretty big guy, and he could put away a lot of food.

As Xander held his burrito up and caught some drippy juice in his mouth, Jay said, "So, you're originally from Sunnydale, huh?"

"Yep. Born and raised."

Jay stroked at his dark mustache. "Did you ever notice that this town is kinda...unusual?"

Xander choked a little. He put down the food and swallowed some Coke. "Unusual? What do you mean?"

Jay sort of shifted his eyes around, like he wanted to make sure nobody would overhear, and leaned forward. "Different. Weird. Like, there was the disaster at the high school, for example."

"Gangs on PCP."

“Really? I mean, who ever heard of a gang on PCP?”

“I don’t know. But I was there. It was, um, really wild.”

Jay looked impressed. “Oh. Hadn’t realized. But I heard something really strange happened with the mayor there.”

“Politicians. All pretty off, in my book.”

Jay didn’t look convinced. “Well, what about some of the other stuff, then? Like a few months back, there was a professor over at the college murdered, and a priest. It was pretty mysterious.”

Xander drank some more. “Violent crime is a problem all over America. We’re not immune.”

Jay leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. “Violent crime with barbecue forks? I don’t think *that’s* a problem all over America.”

Xander wasn’t sure what to say. This wasn’t something he talked about, except with the Scoobies. It wasn’t something anyone around here talked about. They were all willfully blind or

suffering from some sort of strange mass delusion, but most of Sunnydale acted like the Hellmouth wasn't there. "Okay," he finally said. "Maybe this town is a little out of the ordinary."

The other man nodded. "More than a little." Then he picked up a taco and took a big bite. With his mouth full, he said, "So, do you think Peters was stoned when he came to work the other day?"

~*~*~*~*~

Anya was spending most of her free time with Mark. According to her, she and Spike weren't interacting much while Xander was at work. She mostly studied or worked, and when Xander wasn't home, Spike preferred to remain in their bedroom, looking at the pictures in Xander's comic books.

"He's not going to need you a whole lot longer, you know," Anya said when Xander came home one evening. "Another couple of months and you should be free."

“Free. Great.”

She gave him a narrow-eyed look, like she was trying to see through him. “When he’s gone, our agreement—”

“Hey, no problem, Ahn. I’ll continue to pay the rent and all as long as you want. You’ve been a really huge help. You deserve it.”

“I have been a huge help. You couldn’t have done this without me.”

He couldn’t help but laugh a little. “No, I really couldn’t.”

“Maybe I’ll move in with Mark soon anyway, and you can have the place to yourself.”

“Whatever.”

“I would think you’d be happier.”

“I’m...I’m just tired, okay? Long day.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, and he walked past her and into the bedroom.

Spike was sitting cross-legged on the bed. For once he was clothed. Now that he could manage to get his own clothes on and off, Xander had bought him some black jeans and tees. Spike was a lot more amenable to wearing those than the sweats Xander had been trying to keep him in. He looked a lot more like himself, too, although his hair was in wild curls almost to his shoulders, with only the tips glowing peroxide blond.

Spike looked up from his book as Xander entered and gave him a broad, bright smile. "Hello, Xander," he said.

"Hi, Spike. How was your day?" Xander sat down heavily on the bed to pull off his boots.

"Bloody boring," Spike moaned as melodramatically as a thirteen-year-old girl. "Any a said no telly."

"Yeah, well, that's 'cause yesterday you got too excited over that movie and spilled O-Neg all over the carpet. I'm never gonna get my deposit back on this place."

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

Xander snorted. “No more Stephen King for you.”

Spike threw himself backward on the mattress hard enough to bounce. “There’s nothing to do,” he whined.

“I wish I had your problem. Working my ass off all day at the site and then coming home and...and merciful Zeus, I’m turning into my father.” Xander rubbed his hands against his face. “How about a walk?”

Spike shot back up and thumped Xander on the back. “Brilliant! Let’s go!”

Spike hadn’t been outside since they’d moved in to the apartment. He smiled when Xander brought him his old Docs, even though Xander had to help him tie them. Xander laced his Nikes onto his own feet and they left the building.

Xander wasn’t actually certain whether taking Spike out was such a great idea. The vampire had been especially unpredictable for the last week or so, all erratic mood swings. One minute he’d be happily snuggling on the sofa, the next he’d be stomping

around, raging about not getting his way over something. But he couldn't stay cooped up inside forever; Xander wasn't sure why it hadn't occurred to Spike that he could just take off on his own. It wasn't like Xander would have been able to stop him. The other strange thing was that even when Spike was yelling furiously, Xander never felt like he was in danger. Intellectually, he knew Spike could turn on him anytime, but he just couldn't feel afraid. Well, a lot of people had called him stupid over the years.

As soon as they got out onto the sidewalk, Xander's misgivings about the outing evaporated. Spike plastered himself so close to Xander's side that Xander kept tripping over him. Finally, Xander put a hesitant arm around Spike's shoulders. Spike sighed and slipped his arm around Xander's waist. "You okay?" Xander asked quietly, feeling how tense Spike's body was.

"Yeah. Just... 't's new."

"Okay. We'll just go a couple blocks or so. Nothing very daring."

Spike seemed satisfied with that, and they walked in silence for a little while. There was a warm breeze, maybe the Santa Anas starting to kick up. They could hear televisions blaring through people's open windows, a small dog yapping behind a fence, a siren calling far away. Xander wondered if his friends were out in a cemetery right then. Willow had told him that Buffy's boyfriend was one of those commando-types who had chipped Spike, which made Xander very uneasy, but apparently he was a pretty good guy nonetheless, and lately he'd been patrolling with them.

Maybe it was the change of scenery, but for some reason Xander felt suddenly compelled to ask Spike a question that had been floating in his head for some time. "Spike, do you understand what happened to you?"

It took Spike a moment to answer. "Hurt my head."

"Pretty much. Um...do you remember stuff? From before, I mean?"

"Yes. 'T's...fuzzy, yeah?" Then Spike came to a halt, dragging Xander to a stop as well. "Xan? I was.... I

remember.... I hurt....” He swallowed audibly. “I was bad.”

Xander had to think before he answered. “You’re a vampire, Spike. It’s what vampires do. You’re not—you weren’t as nasty as a lot of them. You even had some redeeming qualities. You were loyal to your girl. You didn’t try to destroy the world. You kept your promises, I guess. There were some times when you could have killed me, and you didn’t.”

“Why...why did you.... Why help me?” Spike was still huddled against him, but his head was turned away.

Xander didn’t really know the answer to that question himself. “I found you. You needed help.” It was the best he could do.

Spike looked at him then, his brow slightly furrowed. Then he sighed and tugged Xander along to continue their walk.

Anya was just leaving the apartment as they arrived. She waved at them and rushed by, probably late to class.

Inside, they kicked off their shoes and Spike got himself some blood—he could do that now without making the kitchen look like the scene of a mass murder—and Xander reheated some leftover pizza. They settled in for a couple hours of TV, watching reality shows until Xander couldn't keep his eyes open any longer. "I'm gonna turn in," he said. Spike nodded absently at him.

But when Xander emerged from the bathroom, teeth minty fresh and wearing only his boxers, Spike was already curled up in bed, pulling at one of his own curls. "Will you buy me some bleach? And gel?" he asked. "Don't fancy my hair all...poncy."

Xander chuckled and slid between the sheets. "Sure. But maybe you should consider a different color, for a change. Purple, maybe. Bright blue." Just before Xander turned off the light, he saw Spike roll his eyes.

Xander was almost asleep when Spike asked, very quietly, "Can we have another walk tomorrow?"

"Sure."

And then, after another long silence, “How long am I meant to stay here?”

Xander’s heart sped up a little. “You’re not a prisoner, Spike. Leave whenever you want to.”

“But...if I don’t want to?”

Oh. Xander felt stupidly dizzy with relief. “Stay as long as you like.”

In an even tinier voice, Spike said, “Ta.”

Xander really did slip quickly into sleep after that, unconsciousness closing over his head like warm waves. He dreamed of a day at the beach when he was eight or nine. Willow’s mother had taken them after repeated whining from Willow, and then promptly buried her face in a book as soon as they’d arrived. That was fine with Willow and Xander, who’d run off to splash in the surf. Jesse was away, visiting his grandparents in Arkansas or somewhere. So Xander and Willow had had a great afternoon, interrupted only occasionally when her Mom made her reapply sunscreen. Then Willow had decided to bury him in the sand, which was fun at

first, but in the dream the sky grew suddenly dark and Willow and her mother and everyone else on the beach disappeared, and Xander was trapped, immobile, as something he couldn't quite see stalked him....

He woke up abruptly, and then began to panic when he realized he really was pinned in place by some weight, and something was squashed up against his face. He tried to struggle free. "Spike!" he gasped as he managed to dislodge Spike's mouth from his own.

Spike sort of undulated against him.

"Oh, gods! Don't!" Xander cried.

Spike wiggled again. "I want you, Xan."

"We can't! It's not.... You don't...." Somehow, forming a coherent sentence seemed beyond him at the moment.

"You want me," Spike said, somewhere ambiguously between a statement and a question.

“I don’t.... Oh, Christ, Spike, don’t do that! We can’t do this.”

“Why not? Because I’m a demon?”

“No, that’s not...not exactly....” He groaned as Spike executed a maddening little twist of his hips.

“Because I’m male?”

Oh, God, he definitely was, the proof of which was digging insistently into the fabric at the hollow of Xander’s hip.

“Noooo,” Xander almost sobbed. What did Spike think he was doing with his cold hands? His cold, strong, clever hands. Xander reached up and grabbed Spike’s hips to stop the vampire’s movements. He tried to ignore the fact that that meant Xander’s fingertips were splayed along the outside swell of Spike’s bare ass, where the skin was so smooth and soft and tight over hard muscles, and—“Stop!”

“Why?” Spike said, his voice deep and raspy. “Can *feel* you, Xan. All hot and hard against me.”

“I can’t.... I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

That statement finally made Spike freeze. “What?”

“I believe that you want m—want *this* right now. But you’re not really yourself, Spike, not yet. And you’ve got vamp hormones or whatever running through you, and I’m the only one here, and...and later you’ll regret this. You’ll be angry.”

“Won’t,” Spike said. He dropped his head a little and licked along Xander’s jawline, then sucked slightly on one earlobe.

Xander gave in. He was only human, after all, and had never claimed to be Willpower Guy, and Spike felt so goddamn good on top of him. He fit just right, as if he were meant to be right there. Xander knew he’d hate himself over this in the morning—assuming he survived the night, that is—but he just couldn’t bring himself to care. Not when Spike was making those sexy little mewling noises; not when Xander’s hands had wandered of their own will to Spike’s ass cheeks, which flexed under his palms; not when Spike worked a hand between their chests and tweaked and plucked at Xander’s

nipples; not when the thin fabric of his boxers was suddenly far too thick and the friction at their groins was going to kill him dead.

The underwear must have been frustrating Spike, too. He sort of growled and reared up on his knees, then tore the fabric away with one quick twist of his wrists. He collapsed back down, so that every inch of the front of his body was touching the corresponding bit of Xander's skin. "Oh, fuck," Xander said.

What followed was clumsy and fumbling and much too quick. Xander had little experience with another man, and if Spike did, he probably didn't remember very well. Besides, they were both starving for sex—it had been many months for Xander, and who knew how long for Spike—and too desperate to make any attempt at coordination. They rutted against each other, fast and hard, and they kissed fiercely. And within minutes Xander felt Spike shudder, and what rhythm he'd had faltered, and their bellies and groins were slicked with tepid, sticky liquid. "Ohhh," Xander called out, and he

came, too, his climax rushing through him like a jolt of electricity.

As swift and awkward as it was, the sex was better than even his most adventurous times in bed with Anya.

Spike flopped bonelessly on top of him. They were both panting. “Uh, Spike,” Xander said when he could talk again.

“Mmm?”

“Need to breathe, here.”

Spike whined a little, but he licked Xander’s neck once, then rolled off onto his side, scrunching his back against Xander. He wiggled a bit, getting comfortable, and emitted the most self-satisfied sigh Xander had ever heard. And then Spike promptly went to sleep.

Part Six

When Xander's alarm went off, Spike blinked at him sleepily, stretched luxuriously in a way that made Xander's eyes glaze over a little, and then smiled as smugly as the proverbial canary-eating cat.

"We're going to talk about...this...later," Xander said as he got out of bed. When getting out of bed was really the last thing he wanted to do just then.

Spike's eyes sparkled.

It's because Spike was bored, Xander decided as he showered. All Xander had to do was find something to entertain the vampire, and Spike would lose interest in Xander, and then Spike would complete his recovery and, it was to be hoped, not rip Xander's throat out or share details with Buffy et al. Xander knew just what to do. There was a Target not far from the job site; on his lunch break today he'd trot over there and pick up a PlayStation and a couple of games of the gorier type. That would keep Spike busy a while.

Spike seemed to have gone back to sleep by the time Xander emerged from the bathroom. But when Xander went into the kitchen, he was surprised to discover Anya there, her hands cupped around a cup of fragrant tea.

“You’re up early, Ahn. Or did you just get in?” He reached into the fridge to grab the lunch he’d packed the night before. He figured he could persuade Jay to do a drive-through for breakfast and coffee on their way in.

“Mark and I broke up.”

He turned and looked at her. “I’m sorry. Um, you didn’t, uh, with the vengeance...?”

She rolled her eyes. “No. It was by mutual agreement. The sex wasn’t very satisfying. He’s kind of boring. And the former demon thing freaked him out.”

“Oh. Well, I’m sorry,” he repeated.

She shrugged. “Plenty more fish.”

All day Xander tried very, very hard not to think about Spike. It wasn't an easy task. He could almost feel that silky skin, could nearly taste Spike's coppery kisses. Every time he closed his eyes, even for a moment, he could *see* Spike moving atop him, beautiful face twisted with pleasure.

He remembered to buy the video game console during lunch. Jay caught him as Xander was tucking the bag into Jay's truck. "Getting some shopping done, man?"

"Yep. It kinda sucks, not having a car of my own. I really appreciate the rides. A couple more months, though, and I should have enough saved up to buy something that's not falling apart. Then I can drive you to work sometimes."

"Sounds great. It's no big deal to pick you up, though. You're right on the way."

They walked back toward the building together. It would be finished in another week or so. But Landeros had already assured Xander that they had a whole string of jobs lined up, and that he fully intended to keep Xander gainfully employed.

“Hey, I don’t suppose you could manage to get free for a couple hours tomorrow night?” Jay asked.

“Man, I wish I could. But—”

“I know, I know. Spike. It’s just me and my friends, we got this thing going.” He lowered his voice.

“Can’t explain right now. But I bet you’d be into it.”

Xander’s eyebrows rose, and the other man laughed. “Don’t worry, dude. Nothing kinky. Just...well, see if you can break free for a while and you’ll see.”

Xander promised he’d see what he could do.

As the afternoon wore on, he found himself dwelling on Jay’s invitation. It was a welcome distraction from naked vampires, anyway. Jay had been really cool, but sooner or later he was going to give up on Xander. By the time Spike moved out and Xander was ready to take Jay up on his offer, Jay might not want anything to do with him anymore.

Just the thought of the crushing loneliness he was afraid of facing was enough to make Xander’s head buzz.

He'd find a way to get tomorrow off. There had to be some way, just for one evening.

After Xander got home, Anya left right away for school. Xander settled a very enthusiastic vampire in front of the TV for a noisy game of Grand Theft Auto, and then snuck into the kitchen with the phone. It rang three times before the other end picked up.

"Rupert Giles."

"Giles! How's it going?"

"Is something wrong, Xander?"

"Does something need to be wrong for me to give you a call? Maybe I just want a friendly chat."

Giles didn't say anything for a moment. Then,

"What's wrong, Xander?"

"I need a big favor. Please. I was gonna ask Will, but she said she's tied up this weekend, and I know Buff's got the new guy and patrolling duty, and—"

"What is it?"

“Could you come stay with Spike for a couple of hours tomorrow night? He won’t be any trouble. He can feed himself now, and he watches a lot of TV, and he’s been learning to read, so—”

“Fine. You’ve been.... I know these months have been quite difficult for you, managing Spike nearly all alone. The rest of us should have given you more assistance. I expect he’s a handful.”

Xander just barely suppressed hysterical laughter.

“Um, yeah. I mean, it hasn’t all been awful, not really, but I could really use a break. Just for a couple hours.”

“What time shall I arrive?”

When Xander hung up the phone, he felt slightly giddy at the prospect of an evening out. Also a little guilty at abandoning Spike, even if only for a short time. He’d just have to make the ground rules clear to everyone, that was all. No staking, no biting, no chains.

~*~*~*~*~

Jay whooped with happiness when Xander told him he'd be there that night. "That's *great*, man! We could really use you, too. When you find out what we're gonna do—it's a huge rush."

"Um, it's not drugs, is it? 'Cause, not being judgmental here, but I'm a Just Say No kinda guy, and—"

"No," Jay laughed, slapping him on the shoulder. "No drugs. 'Less you count a beer or two when the night's done. Nah, this is a natural high."

So Xander made it through the day with anticipation and curiosity and a slight amount of dread stirring up his brain, and he was glad when Landeros called it quits and Xander and Jay piled into the truck. Jay dropped Xander off at the apartment before saying, "See ya later!" and driving off to his own place.

Spike was playing video games, and he barely looked up and grunted as Xander entered. Anya was in the kitchen, reading a magazine. Xander gathered his dinner—leftover fried chicken, coleslaw, some

of the pink fluffy Jello-ey stuff that he wasn't sure was even really a food—and joined her at the table.

“He been playing that all day?” Xander asked, gesturing with a drumstick into the living room with its loud sounds of sirens and screeching tires.

“Mostly. He ate all your Pringles, by the way. And he spent about an hour in your bedroom this afternoon. I thought he was taking a nap, but I heard him calling your name. I think he was masturbating.”

Xander almost choked on some cabbage.

Anya just tilted her head at him. “You do realize he has an enormous crush on you, don't you? When you're gone, he talks about you all day. Xander this. Xander that. Xander is so good and kind and wonderful.”

Xander was blushing so furiously it hurt. “Did he uh.... He didn't.... Um—”

“Did he what? Tell me you two had sex?”

Xander groaned and sank his head onto his arms and hoped to die.

Anya cackled and slapped the table. “I knew it!”

He looked up at her. “What?”

“He didn’t actually tell me that, but I suspected. And now I know.”

He groaned again, overcome with the impossibility of ever outwitting current or former demons.

Anya reached over and patted his shoulder. “I’ll bet you two are really hot together. If you ever want to try a threesome—”

“No!” He sat up very suddenly and scooted his chair back so fast he almost toppled backwards. “No threesomes, and no— Just no.”

She shrugged. “All right,” she said, and went back to her magazine.

Xander tried to collect himself. “Look, please don’t tell anyone, okay? Not Buffy, not—” Oh, shit. Giles. He took a deep breath. “Giles is coming over tonight

to stay with Spike while I go out for a little while. He probably won't even come over until after you leave, but if you do see him—"

"I'm not going out tonight."

"Huh?"

"My class was cancelled. The professor's at a conference."

"Oh. I guess I can call Giles, then, and tell him to forget it."

"No, don't. I might decide I feel like going to the Bronze later, and I could use a break from Spike, too. Maybe I'll pamper myself this evening. I've heard Buffy talk about it—soak in the bath, do my nails, color my hair, try out my new vibrator." She nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

"Okay. Fair enough. Just, please. Not a word to Giles about...you know."

"About you and Spike having sex?"

He was getting a headache. "Yeah. About that."

“Are you ashamed of him?”

“No!” He thought for a moment. “I have enough shit in my life already; I don’t want to face more of it over this.”

“Your friends shouldn’t give you a hard time over Spike. After all, Buffy was in love with a vampire, and Giles has that dark past, and Willow’s gay.”

“Will—wait—what?”

“She hasn’t told anyone yet, either. But I’ve seen the way she and that Tara girl make googly eyes at each other, and I saw them holding hands the other day on campus. And all that talk about ‘researching’ and ‘spells’? Come on! Even a troll could figure out that subtext.”

Xander just goggled at her. At some point his life had taken a turn past Merely Strange, and he’d ended up in Completely Surreal. It was more than he could deal with at the moment. He quickly finished the last few bites of his food, stuck the dishes in the sink, and washed his hands. “Okay,” he said, turning back toward Anya. “Maybe you’re right

about my friends. But I want it to be me who tells them. Not that there's much to tell them, 'cause it's not like Spike's in love with me or anything, and he'll be denying even tolerating me soon."

Anya made that face like she didn't believe him but had decided it wasn't worth arguing over.

Xander filled a mug with blood and brought it into the living room. Spike glanced up at him, smiled, and put down the controller before taking the mug from Xander's outstretched hand. "Can we have another walk tonight?" Spike asked, almost sloshing some of his blood out of the cup. "That was brilliant. We could go a little farther tonight. And then we can come home and I'll kick your arse at this game. Then we can go to bed." He stopped and slurped, apparently satisfied that he'd mapped out their evening sufficiently.

Xander scratched his head. "Sounds good. But not tonight. I'm going out for a while."

Spike put down the mug. "Without me?"

“Just for a couple hours. It’s this guy from work and, well, explaining you would be kinda tough.”

Spike’s face fell. “You don’t want me.”

Xander sighed and sat beside him. He put an arm around Spike’s middle, and refused to move it when Spike tried to shrug away. “It’s not that. I need a little...non-demony time. That’s all. Nothing supernatural, just regular guys. I’ll only be gone a little while, and when I come back we can watch *Reservoir Dogs* and *From Dusk till Dawn*. I’ll make popcorn.”

In a slightly perkier voice, Spike asked, “And we can shag?”

“Um....”

Spike slumped again. “Don’t know if I can bear being by myself,” he almost whispered.

“You won’t be. Anya’s probably going to stay home tonight, and Giles is going to come over and keep you company.”

Spike looked at him incredulously. “The Watcher is going to...to watch me? I remember, Xan. He and I don’t get on.”

“Neither did you and I, and look where we are now. Um, not that you should be thinking about having sex with Giles,” he added quickly.

Spike rolled his eyes, but seemed resigned. Xander squeezed him and then stood. “It’ll be fine. I’m gonna go shower now, okay?”

Spike grumbled something and picked up the game controller again.

~*~*~*~*~

Things were awkward when Giles first arrived. He and Spike eyed one another warily, like they were each afraid the other might bite. Giles tensed even more when Anya came into the room. But she smiled at the men. “I was wondering, with Xander going out and all, if you two would take the opportunity to teach me about the rules of cricket. I

looked, and there's a match on TV in twenty minutes."

Xander could have kissed her.

When he left the house a short time later, he tried to remind them that he'd left Jay's phone number by the fridge and they could call in case of an emergency. But Giles shushed him and continued blabbing about pitches and overs and creases, and Spike waved him away. Anya glanced in Xander's direction and winked.

Xander hummed happily to himself as he walked the three blocks to Jay's place. An actual Night Out, with Guys, and No Demons or Slayers or Watchers or Witches. A fucking miracle.

Jay lived on one end of a triplex that had seen better days. Xander couldn't blame him—he knew the guy was saving up to buy his own house. Besides, it was a Guy Pad, so a certain amount of scruffiness was expected. It certainly had to be a lot better than Xander's late, unlamented basement lair.

Jay answered the door with a big hello and one of those manly half-hug, half handshake things. Xander could tell from the sound of masculine voices that the rest of the group was already there. “Sorry, I didn’t bring anything,” Xander said, standing awkwardly in the doorway. “I can run to the store and get some chips or something—”

The other man laughed and tugged him inside. “Don’t sweat it, bro. We can make a 7-11 run after.”

After what? Xander wondered. But before he could ask, Jay was leading him inside, into a living room filled with comfortable, battered-looking furniture. A half dozen men were there, gathered around something that was spread across the coffee table. Jay introduced them, but Xander didn’t have much luck catching names. There was a Tony, he thought, and that guy with the goatee was apparently called Feeb; for the rest, he had no idea. They all shouted out greetings, though, and a couple of them moved obligingly over so he could join them in looking down at what turned out to be a map.

“Jay says you grew up here,” said one of the men, a guy with thin reddish hair and a beer-belly.

“Yep.”

“Cool. So you can give us some tips on navigating. Jay’s the only one who actually lives in Sunnydale, you know. The rest of us gotta drive in.”

“Oh, okay. What are you trying to find?” This crowd definitely seemed too old for a scavenger hunt. But Willow had told him about this thing she’d read on the Internet, where people used maps and GPS-gadgets and things to find little boxes with toys and stuff inside them. It was called geo-something. Maybe that’s what Jay’s friends were into.

“What are we looking for?” the redhead chuckled.
“Trouble, man.”

Xander just blinked, bewildered.

“Okay,” Jay said, pointing at a spot on the southeast part of the map. “This is Restfield Cemetery, right?” He looked up at Xander, who nodded. He did know his graveyards, by golly. “Good. Then this little spot

over here, that's that bar, um, what's it called, Terry?"

"Willy's," said a tall man with dark skin.

Xander got a very bad feeling in his stomach.

But Jay went on. "Willy's. So I figure, there's gotta be some secret way that the vamps are getting from Restfield to Willy's, 'cause I hear they even hang out there in the daytime. I walked the most direct route, and I don't see any way they could do that without getting zapped by sunlight. Xander, do you have any ideas?"

"Um, vampires?" Xander said, knowing his voice sounded high and kind of screechy. "No such thing. Oh, is this one of those role-playing games? What's it called—LARG? LARD?" Willow had told him about that, too.

"Aw, come on Xander. You know better. No way a guy lives his whole life here without knowing what's what. We already talked about this, remember? I thought you were down with it."

Xander swallowed. “Oh, I’m down. I’m very down.” The other men all looked at him, their eyebrows raised. “Why do you want to know about vampire routes? I mean, other than so you can stay far, far away. That’s my policy.”

Jay put an arm around Xander’s shoulders. He was a little taller than Xander. “Here’s the deal, dude. This town is filled with monsters. Not just vampires, either, right? And they pretty much do whatever they want, munching on the locals, terrorizing folks. Just the other day, some little kid got skewered. Didja hear about that on the news? Psycho killer, they said. Psycho killer, my ass. It was a monster of some kind.”

“Yeah, probably. But what—” Actually, Xander knew the answer to the question he was trying to ask.

“We hunt ‘em. It’s cool—you can bash ‘em up, knife ‘em, whatever you want. Not like the cops are gonna nab you for it. Hell, we’re doing a public service! Christ knows, the cops don’t do anything about the monsters. Nobody does. Well, there’s this weird little blond chick. She came by a couple weeks

ago and tried to scare us off. Claimed it was her job. Right! Like that little bit of nothing could take on a vamp. She's probably just some kinda do-gooder, member of PETA for demons or something."

Xander felt sick. Didn't they notice that his face had gone pale and his knees were feeling rubbery?

But Jay just kept on talking. "There's these Army dudes or something, too. We've seen 'em around a few times, and I think they're after the monsters, too. But they don't seem to be doing a very good job at it. I mean, the beasts are still everywhere." He grinned. "Easy pickings, really."

"What—" Xander had to stop and clear his throat. "What do you do with demons when you find them?"

"We don't ask 'em to dance, man." All the men except Xander laughed. "Now, we can't shoot 'em. Would be cool if we could, but that really might piss off the cops. Gotta rely on quieter methods, stuff that won't piss off the neighbors." He waved his hand toward the pile of items that Xander probably should have noticed earlier.

The pile was up against the walls in one corner of the room. There were a bunch of what looked like broken broomsticks with one end sharpened. There were several knives of various shapes and sizes, some in scabbards and some with bare blades, and a couple of swords. And there were crowbars and lengths of rebar and heavy piping, any of which would do just fine for, say, smashing a vampire's brains out of his skull.

"Fuck," Xander said.

Jay mistook his meaning. "Yep. We fuck the monsters up really good."

Xander ducked away from Jay's arm and scuttled backward, toward the door. He needed to get out of there now, before he puked or screamed or...he didn't know what. Nothing good.

"What's the matter?" Jay asked his face creased with concern.

"I, uh, I gotta go."

"Go? You just got here. Hey, we didn't scare you, did we? I promise you, the hunting is all perfectly

safe. Unless you're a demon, of course." Had he always had so many teeth?

Xander practically ran for the exit. "I'm not scared, I just...I can't...I gotta go!" And he yanked the door open and fled into the night, ignoring Jay's calls behind him.

Part Seven

He didn't head home.

There were several reasons for this. One was an irrational, gibbering voice in the back of his head that insisted that Jay and the others knew that Spike—and Anya, for that matter—were back at Xander's place, and that they were going to follow him home.

Second, he knew he looked really shaken, and he didn't want Giles and Anya and Spike to see him like that. Spike, especially. He had no idea what effect his own emotional distress would have on Spike's fragile mental state.

And third, Xander had no fucking idea what he was going to do. Having made a completely ignominious exit from Jay's apartment, he knew that Jay would be thinking him a coward at best. How could Xander face him at work in the morning? And how could Xander face Spike, knowing exactly who had hurt the vampire so badly, and also knowing that Xander had just walked away?

Fuck.

No matter what he did, it seemed, Xander was screwed. His life was ruined. His small little life, which he'd been working so hard at lately, and which had finally and for once progressed beyond major ass suckage.

There was a time when he'd have immediately turned to Willow with problems like these. But now, it seemed, he and Willow were keeping important secrets from one another. He didn't even feel like he really knew her anymore. She'd probably say the same about him. And Buffy was no better. Giles, of course, would Dear Lord and clean his glasses, but

would he really give Xander any advice more useful than “Do be careful”?

Besides, if he asked any of them what to do, it would only confirm what they all knew already. He was nothing. Stupid and useless.

He took the chickenshit way out in the end. He did nothing.

He walked around empty streets for a while, until he figured he'd been gone long enough to make a good show. Then he went back home, where he discovered Giles and Anya looking kind of cozy together on the couch, poring over some old book, while Spike sat next to them, playing his PlayStation.

“Did you have a nice evening?” Giles asked. He looked oddly flustered, Xander thought, but then Xander didn't have the mental energy to deal with that right then.

“Yeah, um, sure. We just...watched a ballgame on TV.”

“Who won?” Anya asked.

Crap. “Um, I’m not sure. The guys were kind of flipping back and forth between games, and then I left sort of early. Didn’t want to impose on Giles too long.”

“Oh, it was no imposition,” Giles said. “In fact, I’d be happy to come again, should the need arise. Or perhaps if you’d just like another social night.”

Anya bounced up and toward Xander. “Rupert and I have the best idea! We’re going to buy that old magic store—you know, the one where the owners keep getting eaten.” They all looked at Spike, who blinked innocently and returned to his game. “We can get it very cheaply. There’s a real need for a decent magic shop in this town, and with Willow’s connections, we’ll have a built-in customer base right away.” She beamed in Giles’s direction; he looked slightly embarrassed, but also pleased.

Xander was just reeling from too much.

“That’s...that’s great. Mazel tov. Let me know when you need some help moving in.”

Giles stood, too, and put the book down on the end table. “Well, perhaps I should be going....”

“No!” Anya grabbed at his arm. “Don’t go yet! We still haven’t finalized our business plan. Maybe we should have a mission statement. And we need to discuss some of the supply-side issues, because I think—”

“Anya.” Giles extricated himself and patted her shoulder. “Soon, I promise.”

“How soon?”

“How about Saturday? I can ring the real estate agent and we can meet at the shop. We really need to get a better idea of its physical state before we can finalize anything.”

She nodded reluctantly. “All right. Saturday *morning*, though.”

Giles picked up his jacket from a chair back and slipped it on. He and Anya did a funny little dance, like they weren’t certain how to move around each other, and then he told her, “Good night.”

“Good night, Rupert,” she said, and then headed for her bedroom.

As Giles walked toward Xander, he said, “Are you quite all right? You look a bit...ill.”

Spike had looked up sharply at the question, his game momentarily forgotten.

Xander tried his best approximation of a smile. “Just tired. Been burning the candle at both ends, you know. Hey, thanks again, Giles.”

“It’s been my pleasure. Good night, Spike.”

Spike mumbled something unintelligible in reply.

Giles left, and Xander went to get ready for bed. He wasn’t surprised when he emerged from the bathroom to discover Spike stretched across the bed. He lay on top of the bedding, naked and grinning. “Not too tired, are you?”

Xander considered going off to sleep on the couch, but that would require explanations he wasn’t ready to provide. He sort of nudged Spike over and

slid between the sheets. “I’m wiped, Spike. Working man, remember?”

Spike pouted. “You had time for your mate.”

“I didn’t—” But before Xander could finish his response, Spike had repositioned himself under the covers as well, his cool, hard body pressed against Xander’s.

“I was good tonight. Minded the Watcher.” He chuckled into the crook of Xander’s neck.

“Reckoned he and the demon bint were going to start snogging any moment.”

Xander sputtered. “They were going to—Giles and Anya? Snog?”

“Yeah. She’s got him, good and proper. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

“That’s...that’s really weird.”

Instead of answering, Spike sucked on Xander’s neck.

“Oh, God! Not— Don’t!”

“Not going to bite, berk. Not unless you want me to.” Spike’s hand snaked down until he was gripping Xander’s cock. The organ in question twitched and began to harden under his caress. “Perhaps you *do* want me to,” Spike said.

“No! No biting! And no.... Jesus Christ, Spike!”

“Used to be good at this, I think. ‘T’s been a few decades, but I don’t believe I’ve lost my touch.”

He definitely hadn’t. His touch was very deft, and Xander felt like he might become nothing but a babbling mess any second. While he could still control himself a little, Xander grabbed Spike’s wrist. “Spike! Stop! We can’t do this!”

Spike sighed and levered himself up on his elbows so that Xander had a better look at his face. “Why not? Went through this already. I want you, you want me. Very simple really.”

“Not so simple. You want me now. Jesus, Spike, in a few weeks you’ll be all better, and then you’ll hate us both over this. It’s just...you’ve been kind of dependent on me, and I’ve been helping you. It’s

like Stockholm Syndrome or something. But you won't need me much longer, and then you'll remember I'm just Xander Harris."

Spike closed his eyes for a moment, and then opened them. "I know I've still a few screws loose. But my memories, my thoughts, they're becoming clearer every day. I know who I am—what I was—and I know who you are as well. I'm not daft. And you know what one thing has been a constant to me, since I first became aware of anything? You. Sodding Xander Harris, feeding me and cleaning me and holding me when I'm scared. Giving up most of his life for me, a vampire. Even before I remembered how to speak, I was dreaming of your heartbeat, your scent. Of you."

Spike stopped talking and looked away.

Xander tried to come up with a response that wouldn't belittle Spike's words, but that would let Spike know what a shit Xander really was.

But Spike wasn't finished, because he turned his head back to focus his eyes like laser beams on Xander's. "I know what I am. 'M a monster, yeah?"

But I can be more. I can try, anyhow. Give me a chance, Xander. For you, I can be good. I won't kill, I won't harm humans, I won't.... I'll be almost a *man*. I'll be worthy of you. Please. Let me try."

Spike's eyes were teary. And so were Xander's, goddamn it.

"Spike, I'm...I'm not so good with the speeches. So let me just summarize. I trust you. Maybe I'm nuts, but I do. I *have* trusted you with my life. I think you can be worthy. I'm not so sure I can, though."

Spike frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not...I'm not really a very nice guy."

Spike shook his head. "I trust you," he whispered. From the look on his face, Xander could almost have convinced himself Spike was fully back to himself. But there was something new there, something...softer.

Gently but firmly, Xander shoved Spike off himself and onto the mattress beside him. "Give me a day or two, okay? There are...there are some things I gotta take care of."

“You won’t run away?”

“No. I won’t.” Xander wasn’t exactly certain what he was going to do. But he did know one thing—if Spike could be a better man for his sake, then Xander could do the same for Spike.

~*~*~*~*~

The first thing he did was call in sick. He hoped it wouldn’t cost him his job, but Landeros seemed sympathetic, or at least unwilling to lose a good worker. It was Friday anyway and Xander promised his boss he’d be back on Monday. He didn’t call Jay, and he ignored the horn honking that sounded outside his building.

That accomplished, he showered and shaved and dressed. He cooked himself a real breakfast—eggs and toast and OJ and coffee—and warmed a cup of blood for Spike and brought him breakfast in bed.

Spike blinked sleepily at him. Spike’s hair was wild, which reminded Xander of the promise he’d made.

Well, one of them. The easy one. So he took the empty cup away and tucked Spike back in, then washed all the dishes and put his shoes on.

It was a beautiful morning, the air still crisp. In this light, Sunnydale looked almost normal. Xander walked nearly two miles to Wal-Mart, where he bought Spike his hair supplies and then, figuring he might as well splurge a little, added two new video games to his cart, a three-pack of Pringles, and the newest Stephen King novel. Spike's reading was still very slow and halting, but Xander thought he'd work his way up to *Dreamcatcher* soon enough.

He felt better already as he walked home. Yeah, okay, this task had been pretty simple, but at least it was something done. Spike was sound asleep when Xander returned to the apartment, so Xander left the bag on the kitchen table, and attached a note telling Spike not to destroy the apartment when he bleached his hair.

Then Xander picked up the phone and dialed.

"Rupert Giles."

“Hey, Giles. Me again.”

“Did you need me to demon-sit again already?”
Strangely, Giles sounded almost eager over the prospect.

“Nope. Actually, I was hoping maybe I could meet up with you and the gang today.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No. I just...I have some stuff to tell you, and I’d rather do it all at once. Do you think Willow and Buffy are free?”

“I believe they both have Friday afternoons off. I’ll ring them and see. Shall we meet here at two?”

“That’d be great, Giles. Thanks.” Maybe by then he’d know what he was going to say.

“Xander, are you certain you’re quite all right?”

Xander had to bite his lip at the obvious concern in Giles’s voice. He wondered whether any of them would still be speaking to him by the end of the day.
“I’m...it’s complicated. I’ll explain this afternoon.”

“Very well.”

It was still barely past ten, and Xander felt restless. He peeked in on Spike once more—still sleeping, the lazy thing—and left the apartment. He didn’t have a particular destination in mind. He didn’t want to face Spike just then, and he needed out. So he let his feet have their way with him.

Apparently his feet wanted to swing by his parents’ place. He hadn’t been gone that long, but the house looked more decrepit and pathetic than ever. Browning, weedy lawn. Peeling paint. Loose shingles. Cracked driveway. One of the house numbers was missing, and another was hanging crookedly on a single nail. Seeing the house made all the anger he had at Tony and Jessica evaporate. Xander actually had a chance of a good life, if the demons and all cooperated. His parents would never get anything better than this mess. He felt sorry for them, even if it was their own damn fault.

He swore to himself that no matter what happened with Spike and his friends and his job, he would never return to that basement.

Next, his feet took him by the ruins of Sunnydale High. For some reason, the city still hadn't razed the place. They'd put up a chain-link fence, but the fence was very ineffective at keeping anybody out. Or anything in, for that matter.

He had mixed feelings about seeing the place destroyed. On the whole, high school had been painful, and that was even before the monsters really started showing up. But he'd had some good times there, too, and he'd had some true friends. Back then, he'd never had this nagging uncertainty that had taken up residence in his gut, this feeling like his life was full of monumental decisions that he was sure to fuck up. Maybe that was part of being a grown-up, he thought. If so, it sucked.

It was close to lunchtime by then. Xander wandered downtown. He walked past the Bronze, which was closed of course at this hour. He hadn't been there since he and Anya called it quits. There was The Magic Box, with a "For Lease" sign in the dusty window. As he turned the corner, he saw Buffy coming his way. She didn't see him yet—she was holding the hand of a really big, good-looking guy,

and she was looking at the guy and laughing. Xander ducked back before she spotted him and he headed the other way. The new boyfriend didn't look like the type to play around with vampires' brains. But then Jay didn't look like the type to knock those brains out, either. You never knew.

Xander went into a little hole-in-the-wall Chinese place, Shanghai Garden, and ordered the number 11. He sat far from the front windows to enjoy his garlic chicken and eggrolls and pork fried rice. He wondered if Spike would still want to kiss him, after all that garlic, and then laughed at his own foolishness.

He dragged out lunch until the waitress gave him impatient looks, then paid and emerged back into the sunshine. He ambled aimlessly for some time after that. When he found himself inside a music store, he zeroed in on the punk section, and ended up buying a CD by a band he'd never heard of—Chelsea—whose music would probably make his ears bleed. Maybe, when Spike had been more incapacitated, Xander should have convinced him that his true musical tastes were different. Johnny

Cash. Willie Nelson. Merle Haggard. Xander pictured Spike in a cowboy hat and started laughing so hard that the other customers sort of edged away from him. Then he imagined Spike in chaps and the laughter came to a halt.

Oh, God. He was so gay.

At five minutes before two, he approached Giles's apartment. Someone must have been watching through the window for him, because the door flew open before he could touch it. Willow stood there, her eyes wide. She was clearly about half a step away from panic mode.

"What is it, Xander? Is something wrong? He didn't bite you and turn you, did he?"

Xander pointed up at the bright sun. "If he had, I'd be a lot dustier right now."

She relaxed a little, and he stepped inside.

Giles was there, of course, leaning up against the pass-through to the kitchen. His arms were crossed on his chest and he seemed to be trying—not very successfully—for casual.

Buffy was there, too, sitting on the lap of that handsome guy; he, in turn, was sitting on Giles's armchair. And there was a girl there, with long straight hair and a tie-dyed blouse and some kind of layered skirt. She ducked her head a little shyly. Willow closed the door and sat on the couch beside the girl, not quite touching, Xander noticed.

"So," Xander said. "I guess the gang's all here." He'd kind of hoped not to do this in front of strangers, but here they were, and he didn't want to make an even bigger scene by trying to kick them out. And if he didn't get this over with soon, he was going to die of nervous tension.

There were a few, slightly awkward moments of introduction. Buffy's new guy was Riley Finn, and Willow's friend—she didn't say girlfriend—was Tara Maclay. Fabulous.

Everybody was looking at him expectantly. He spent a few minutes pacing back and forth, then stopped and took a deep breath.

"So, I have some things I need to share. Um. Okay, first off, one of my coworkers, the guy who's been

driving me to work, actually, is part of this group of uncaped crusaders. The ones who've been hunting demons. The ones who got Spike."

"Who's Spike?" Riley asked. Nobody answered him.

"You know those people, Xander?" Buffy said.

"They're amateurs. I told you, they don't know what they're doing, and if you go with them you're gonna get yourself killed."

"I know. I mean, I didn't know what they were up to until last night. Jay's been inviting me over, I thought just to hang out or something. But it turns out I was being recruited."

Willow frowned at him. "Well, you told them no, didn't you? You're already in an army. A better one!"

"Well, yeah, I got the hell out of there as soon as.... Buffy, they didn't take your warning seriously at all. And they know about you guys, Riley, but they're unimpressed."

Buffy and Riley exchanged a look. “I guess I’m going to have to be a little more forceful, then,” Buffy said.

“No!” At their puzzled looks, Xander held up his hands and continued, “I have more explaining to do. Um, Spike’s doing a whole lot better.”

“Who’s Spike?” Riley repeated.

Buffy shushed him. “Has he been threatening you?” she asked Xander.

“No! Not at all. The truth is—”

And before he could make any nervous jokes about them not being able to handle the truth, the door burst open. A blur dashed in, smoking slightly, and flung itself at Xander.

As Tara shrieked, Buffy and Riley jumped out of the chair, getting a little tangled with each other as they did. Which was good, because it meant that by the time Buffy had her stake out and Riley had pulled a gun, Xander had been able to position himself between them and the desperately clinging vampire.

“Spike!” cried several voices at once. Except for Riley, who yelled, “Hostile 17!” And Spike himself, who shouted, “Xander!”

“Back off!” Xander screamed at Buffy and Riley, and at Willow, who was raising her hands like she was about to cast a spell.

A few tense moments followed, during which Xander was fairly certain he was going to end up dead. Then Buffy took a step or two backward, dragging her boyfriend with her, and Willow lowered her arms, and Giles put down the lamp he’d been brandishing. Spike clutched at Xander like a second skin.

With considerable difficulty, and still taking care to shield Spike with his own body, Xander turned around in Spike’s grip. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, Spike?”

“Heard you on the phone this morning. Took me a while to find the way here—I couldn’t quite remember how the tunnels run.” He sounded miserable.

“But why are you here?”

“You’re talking to them about me, yeah? I want to hear. I want....” He fell silent and Xander felt Spike’s chest hitch against his. In a whisper, Spike said, “Don’t want you to give me to them.”

“What is going on here? Are you aware that that’s a *vampire*, Xander?” Riley’s gun was still out, his eyes narrowed.

Xander giggled slightly hysterically. “Yeah, I’m aware. And let’s just stand down and put away the weapons, okay?”

“That’s an excellent idea,” Giles interjected.

Riley stuck the gun back in the holster hidden under his sweater, and Buffy put Mr. Pointy back in her pocket. They didn’t sit down again, though, and they didn’t look happy.

Xander loosened Spike’s grip, just enough so he could get a decent breath. This wasn’t how he’d planned this. Well, he hadn’t really planned this at all, but if he had, he wouldn’t have done it this way.

“I guess since you’re here, you might as well hear this, too, Spike. I mean, it’s about you.”

Spike pulled away slightly and looked straight into Xander’s eyes. “You’re giving me to the Watcher.”

“No. I’m not giving you to anyone. For one thing, you’re not mine to give. You’re not...not a piece of furniture, for Christ's sake.”

Spike tilted his head a little.

“Okay, like I was saying. Spike’s a lot better. Maybe not one hundred percent, but...well, you can see. He’s better. And he and I sort of had this talk last night. Spike promised he won’t kill people anymore.”

Buffy snorted. “Spike promised. That’s great. I suppose he’s gonna sign up for the Peace Corps next. Maybe join the priesthood.”

“You don’t know me, Slayer,” Spike hissed, and Xander squeezed him a little to shut him up.

“Buffy, has Spike ever broken a promise? Even at his worst?”

“He doesn’t have a soul, Xander!”

“So? Plenty of people with souls are really fucking nasty. It’s not the be-all and end-all, Buff. I trust Spike.”

Spike inhaled sharply.

“Why would you trust...*that*?” Buffy asked, waving her hands contemptuously toward Spike.

“Because I love him.” He hadn’t even realized it himself until he said it, but he knew it was the truth.

“Oh, good Lord,” said Giles, while Buffy and Willow and Riley gaped in astonishment. Tara, though, gave a little half-smile. And Spike made a tiny little noise, a sort of whimper, and buried his face in Xander’s neck.

“Spike made you gay!” Willow finally said. “It’s magic! Like, like the thrall. Don’t worry—I’ll find out how to reverse it. There must be a book here—” She started to stand, but Tara grabbed at her and yanked her back down onto the couch.

“Spike did not make me gay,” Xander said as patiently as he could. “It’s been...I’ve been kind of...confused about it since last summer.” Since his experiences in Oxnard, of which he would never ever speak again. “It’s one of the reasons Anya and I broke up, really, although I wasn’t completely admitting it to myself yet. And you know what? I’m okay with it. I’m...I’m here, I’m queer. Get used to it.”

While everyone stared at him, except Tara and Willow, who were having some kind of silent argument with each other using only their eyes, Riley cleared his throat. “Apparently don’t ask, don’t tell doesn’t apply here. No problem. I’m an open-minded kind of guy. But that’s an HST! Now, get out of the way and I’ll dispose of it.”

Xander heard a growl, and realized it was his. “*He* is a vampire. *My* vampire. And there will be no disposal.”

Riley’s lip curled in disgust. “How can you be in love with one of those things?”

Buffy bit at her lip. It seemed that she hadn't yet given the new squeeze the 411 on the old one. Xander decided that wasn't a pit he wanted to fall into.

"Spike's not my first demon or demon-like...um...significant other. He's my favorite, though. Probably the least likely to murder me, even."

Spike sighed against him.

Tara raised her hand. "I...I think it's sweet," she said. "Your auras complement each other perfectly." She put her hand down again when Willow glared at her.

Xander smiled at Tara in gratitude.

It was Giles's turn. "Xander, I know that your feelings for Spike are quite sincere. Understandable, given how much time you've spent together lately, and how much care you've given him. He is clearly, erm, attached to you as well. But once he's fully recovered—"

“Yeah, I know. He’ll come to his senses one day and realize who I am and dump my ass. I know. Doesn’t change how I feel, I’m afraid.”

Spike pushed himself away. “I *won’t!*” he roared at everyone. “I may be a monster. I may still be...not quite right. But I’ve never been inconstant. Never. Not about to begin now.”

“But...why Xander?” Buffy asked.

Xander pretended the question didn’t hurt.

But Spike snarled at her. “He took me in when nobody else would, saved me, cared for me. And he didn’t even bloody like me. He’s fought at your sides when he has no special powers, when he has those bloody horrible parents, when not a one of you appreciated him. He’s strong. He’s good. He makes me think that...perhaps I can be good as well. And he’s brave. He’s stood here and told the truth in front of you all, and you lot are all still sitting there with your secrets.”

Willow and Buffy and Giles all deflated visibly. They didn’t meet Xander’s gaze, or each others’ for that

matter. Suddenly, the walls and the carpet appeared to have become very interesting.

Xander looked at Spike, whose hackles were still up, and who was glowering at nearly everyone else in the room. And, all of sudden, Xander felt really fucking good.

It was as if he'd been carrying a huge weight on his shoulders and someone had taken it away. His lungs felt less constricted. He felt like he could practically float away. So he did the only thing he could think of: he grabbed Spike's shoulders and pulled him in for a fierce, heartfelt kiss.

Part Eight

“Well, that went well.”

They were back in their own apartment, huddled together on the couch. Xander had insisted that Spike drink some blood right away to heal the scorched bits the sunlight had caused on the vampire's pale skin.

"Give them time, Xan. It was all quite a shock, I expect."

"I guess so." They'd left as soon as their kiss had ended. Xander had mumbled something about being in touch later, and then he and Spike had made a dash for the nearest sewer entrance. He had no idea what went on in Giles's apartment after their departure. Maybe the gang was gathering even now with torches and pitchforks. He couldn't bring himself to care, not at this moment.

Spike snuggled up against him so they were leaning heavily against one another. Xander turned his head a little, snuffling at Spike's neck. He hadn't noticed among all the chaos at Giles's place, but Spike had bleached his hair at some point during the day, and he was back to looking like his old self. Xander was

glad, although somewhat leery about the possible state of his bathroom.

They were silent for a long time.

“What if they all hate me now?” Xander finally couldn’t help but ask.

“Then they’re hypocrites who don’t deserve you as a friend.”

Xander sighed.

Spike pulled himself away, nearly making Xander topple over. “Look, I can manage on my own now. If I’m going to cost you your friends, I’ll go. I’ll—”

“No!” Xander said, and saw Spike sag with relief. “They’ll just have to deal. Hey, I put up with Buffy dating Angel.”

Spike snorted softly.

“Spike,” Xander began, feeling his way gingerly onto a new topic he didn’t truly want to address. “Do you remember what happened when you...when you got hurt?”

“Got bashed in the skull.”

“Well, yeah. But do you remember how?”

“I was...I was pissed, I think,” Spike said hesitantly.

“Was drinking at...at a bar, I expect.”

“Willy’s?”

“Don’t know. Can’t remember.”

“I guess that doesn’t really matter anyway.”

“Got in a fight with something.” He shook his head.

“Don’t recall. Big. Scales, like a lizard. I think I won. And then I turned around, and these blokes were there. Human. They saw my fangs. And....” He made a strangled sort of sound.

Xander squeezed him and then, for good measure, kissed the side of his head. Hey, if he was going to declare his love in public, he might as well go full-force schmoopy. Very calmly, he said, “I know who they were. Found out last night.”

Spike went very still against him.

“What do you want me to do, Spike? Want me to tell you where they are?”

“Is this a test of some kind?”

“No. No test. If you want revenge, I won’t stop you, and I won’t hold it against you. I mean, if it was me, I’d want to go rip them to pieces. I won’t tell Buffy, either. Hell, I’ll help if you want.”

Spike twisted around so he was facing Xander. “Is that really what you want to do, Xan? Hurt people—kill them?—because they hurt me? I...I don’t have a soul, but I want....” He huffed out a small breath. “I need you to be my conscience. Please.”

“I’m Jiminy Cricket?”

“So I can be a real boy.”

Xander chuckled lightly at that. “You’re real enough for me.” More seriously, he added, “I’m...uncomfortable with mayhem.”

“Then I’ll stay away from them. Perhaps I should thank them. Look what they got me.” Spike leaned

his forehead against Xander's. "All it took was losing a bit of gray matter to realize your worth."

"I'm not sure that's a compliment."

"Then try this." Spike tilted his head a little and he kissed Xander. It was a very good kiss, slow and tender and passionate. It made Xander's toes curl, made him feel open and warm and kind of melty, like his bones had gone to rubber.

Eventually, Spike pulled away. He looked gorgeous, with his lips slightly swollen and his hair mussed from Xander's wandering hands. Xander felt himself grinning like an idiot.

~*~*~*~*~

Anya came home later, and she took one look at the two of them slumped on the couch, shirtless and with their jeans undone, and frowned. "I hope you didn't have sex on the couch. It's a nice couch. At least, it was before the crumbs and the blood and the man-on-man."

“Didn’t sully your precious furniture,” Spike said.
“Used the floor. I’ve the rug burns to prove it.”

She took a few steps closer, peered at his back, and nodded. “Xander’s very good, isn’t he?”

“He’s bloody brilliant.”

“He wasn’t very experienced when we met, but he’s a fast learner. We rented some videos. You should do that too, if he needs some lessons on gay sex.”

“Nah, I reckon he’ll catch on fine without.”

“I could give you some tips on what he likes. Spanking, for instance—”

“Hey! Hey!” Xander knew his face was beet red, and he was going to be in real trouble if he didn’t intercede. “He is right here, and he’d prefer to keep his private activities private, thanks very much.”

Spike and Anya shrugged and exchanged a look that clearly meant, “Humans. What can you do?” Anya continued on toward the kitchen.

“Hey, Spike?” Xander said after a few more minutes of sex- and TV-induced coma.

“Yeah?”

“I was thinking. I don’t want to kill anyone. But a little scaring the shit out of them would be of the good.”

Spike grinned. “What did you have in mind?”

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They decided to wait until the following night. Friday had been trying enough already, and by ten o’clock Xander was ready to turn in and tune out. Before he fell asleep, though, he noted to himself how nice it was to sleep with Spike without any fabric between them, all that creamy skin pressed against him, and the skin’s owner more than pleased about being stroked and petted.

They slept in the next morning. Then they shagged, still a little clumsily, but Xander was definitely

getting the hang of it. Not that he'd be averse to practice. Lots of it.

"Spike?" he said as he lay sweating atop the ruffled bedding.

"Yeah, pet?"

"Did that, uh, feel as good to you as it looked like it did?"

Spike rolled his head over to look at him and smirked. "Fancying bottoming, are we?"

"Well, you certainly seemed to be enjoying." Spike had come twice that morning, actually, which made Xander a little envious. And kind of proud of himself. "Thought it might be worth a try."

Spike reached over and played his fingers through Xander's sticky pubic hair. "Be happy to give it a go, Xan," he leered. "But you'll need to buy some proper slick first. Don't want to hurt you."

"Did I hurt you?" Xander asked, alarmed. They'd used a bottle of hand lotion that Xander had stolen from Anya's bathroom.

“Nah. Well, a bit, perhaps, but I don’t mind. Vampire, yeah? ‘M mended already. You can check if you want.” He rolled over on his stomach and sort of waggled his ass. Xander laughed and slapped the shimmying globes, which only made Spike wiggle more. “Demon bint wasn’t joking about the spanking, was she?” Now Spike waggled his eyebrows, too.

Xander smacked him one more time and then hoisted himself out of bed. “To be discussed later. When I feel operational again.”

They showered—sadly, not together; the stall was too small—and dressed and went into the kitchen. Xander was just rummaging up some food for them both when Anya came bursting into the apartment, practically jumping up and down with glee. “We rented The Magic Box! We negotiated excellent terms and there’s already some good stock there that we can have. I’ll need to do some rearranging and redecorating—Xander, you’ll build some new shelving and a few display cases—because the previous owner clearly had no idea how to properly entice customers. I mean, she kept the jars of

Kalengi eyeballs right on the counter. Who wants to look at Kalengi eyeballs? Scares the customers right off. She should have had the little charms and crystals there. Impulse items. We're going to set up a little seating area, maybe have some meditation lessons or something now and then. It brings the customers in, keeps them buying. We'll be making a profit in no time at all."

Xander waited until she had to take a breath.
"Sounds fantastic, Ahn. Congratulations."

Spike lifted his mug of blood and sort of toasted her with it.

Then she frowned a little. "I'm afraid Rupert and I are going to be very busy now. Xander, if you still need someone to stay with Spike—"

"I think he's okay on his own. Spike?"

"M a big demon now. I'll manage."

Anya nodded. "Good. But of course this means our agreement's not in force anymore, so if you want me to chip in one-third of the rent—"

“It’s okay. You’ve been a huge help. I can cover the rent anyway.”

She smiled. “Good. I’m sure it’ll only be a few weeks until I move in with Rupert anyway.”

And, as Xander gaped in astonishment, she bounced out of the room.

~*~*~*~*~

Soon after sunset, they got ready. There wasn’t much to it, really. But Spike slicked back his hair and laced on his Docs. And when Xander went into the closet and brought out the beloved duster—Xander had had it cleaned weeks ago, so it was no longer stained with Spike’s brains and blood—Spike smiled hugely and shrugged it on. “Reckoned I’d lost this,” he said, stroking one leather-clad arm.

“I saved it for a special occasion.”

They walked through the darkened streets. Spike’s old hip-rolling prowl was back and Xander found himself hanging back a little just so he could admire

it. “The Big Bad,” he whispered to himself with mixed admiration and dread.

There were a few things he didn't know. For one, he wasn't sure Jay and his gang would be there that evening. For another, assuming Jay was there, he wasn't sure Spike would be able to control himself when facing his attackers, and would really not kill them. Xander wasn't certain he'd be able to restrain himself from jumping the men who'd hurt his...his lover. Even if murder was averted, he didn't know if he'd still have a job Monday morning. But he did know that he had to do this, had to confront Jay and, most importantly, he had to make sure that chipless or not, Spike was in no more danger from Jay's crowd.

Jay's truck was parked outside the triplex, as were a few other cars Xander recognized from Thursday evening. Spike waited for Xander to pound on the door.

Jay saw Xander first. “Xan! Did you change your mind about—” He stopped short when he caught sight of Spike. By the way Jay's face went about

three shades paler, Xander was pretty sure the guy had recognized the vampire he'd attacked. Before Jay could do anything about it, Xander grabbed the front of his shirt—it was a t-shirt with a Harley-Davidson logo on it—and hauled the man outside.

Jay yelled and flailed, trying to get away. He might have managed, too, because he was bigger and heavier than Xander. But Spike took hold of his shoulders and slammed him into the side of the house, pinning him against the wall. Xander positioned himself between them and the door, as Jay's friends came pouring outside as well, most of them brandishing weapons. The red-headed guy had a crowbar in his hands, very possibly the one that had been used on Spike.

Spike vamped out and turned his head so the men could see. They all jumped back a little, and Jay bellowed even louder. Spike's voice was quiet, though, menacing and maybe even slightly playful, in a cat's-got-the-mouse kind of way. "Tell your boys to drop the sticks and blades or I'll rip your throat out," he said.

Jay's eyes were rolling wildly in his head. "Dr-drop it, guys!" he said. After a brief hesitation, they obeyed.

"Now," Spike said, turning his attention back to Jay. "We have a few matters to discuss, haven't we?"

The gargled sound Jay made in reply was not a word.

"You lot fancy yourselves great hunters, don't you? You don't have a bloody idea what you're doing. Can't even dust a vamp when he's helpless. I'm not helpless now." He bared his fangs in a terrible grin and held his mouth inches from Jay's neck. Jay made a sort of squeaking sound, and Spike rumbled out a laugh, and Xander could see in the pool of light from the porch lamp that Jay had pissed himself.

"Let me tell you something about the monsters in this town, ponce. We have eyes and ears in places you can't even imagine. We're underneath you, we're hiding in every shadow, we're watching you as you work and eat and fuck and sleep."

Xander saw the other men shift around uneasily on their feet. He was pretty sure that one good “Boo!” would send most of them hightailing it for the city limits.

Now Spike inclined his head slightly in Xander’s direction. “You see my boy over there? You reckon he’s just a bloke who’s handy with a hammer. But he faced down one of the most vicious vampires in centuries—unarmed, mind you—and that vampire backed off. He’s beaten zombies and more demons than you could count. He’s been possessed by spirits and primal forces, and he’s survived. He’s saved his friends’ lives, he’s helped stop the end of the world, he’s been mates with Slayers and witches and werewolves. He’s tamed *me*, a bit. He’s more a man than you or any of your sorry lot could ever hope to be, and he’s *mine*.”

Listening to Spike’s speech, Xander was a little mystified about how the vampire knew all those things about him. But that wasn’t what was important right now. What was important was his realization that this was *Spike*, the old, original Spike, fully returned to himself and in total control

of his faculties. The tenderness he'd been showing Xander lately, that wasn't a sign that he hadn't fully recovered. It was just another side of him, a side that he probably didn't let others see very often. Spike was back, and he still wanted Xander.

Xander smiled. And maybe there was something to that smile, because Jay's friend Terry muttered, "Fuck this shit," and took off running for his car. The others followed, tearing away from the curb with squealing tires. Within seconds, only Spike, Xander, and Jay remained.

Jay looked like he was trying not to sob with terror.

"You stay away," Spike said. "Stay away from me and mine. Stop demon hunting and take up a hobby that suits you better—crocheting, perhaps. This time I'm warning you nice like. Next time I'll show you what a monster can really do."

Spike turned to Xander. "Anything to add, pet?"

Xander stepped in close. He didn't try to look scary. Spike was doing enough of that for the both of them, although later when Xander was honest with

himself, he was going to admit that Spike with the bumps and the fangs was actually pretty damn hot. Xander kissed Spike's cheek and watched Jay's eyes bug out.

"I love this demon," Xander said. "You try to hurt him again, and I'll take you apart myself. Leave the attempted heroics for people who know what the fuck they're doing." He stepped back again.

"That's it, Xan?" asked Spike.

"I figured it was short and to the point."

"That it was." Spike growled and shook Jay a little, then abruptly let go. Jay collapsed onto his ass.

Spike slung his arm around Xander and they walked away.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander walked to work on Monday. He was really going to have to buy a car. Assuming Landeros didn't fire his ass.

But when he got to the site, Landeros greeted him with a shout and trotted on over. “What the hell happened to Franklin?”

“Um...I don’t know.”

“You didn’t talk to him?”

“Uh, not lately.” If “lately” was defined as within the last thirty-six hours. “He didn’t show up at my place this morning.”

“He left a message on the machine yesterday. He quit. Said something about going back to Wisconsin. Left me an address for sending his last paycheck, the bastard.”

Xander had to hide a grin. “That’s too bad. Wonder what’s up? Maybe his mom took a turn for the worse. She’s been pretty sick.” That was a complete and bald-faced lie, and Xander was sort of proud of it.

But Landeros sighed and nodded. “Yeah, whatever. Even if he did show up now, I’d can his ass. Can’t have goddamn flakes on the job.” He clapped Xander on the shoulder. “Too bad more of ‘em

aren't like you, Harris. Okay, his old pay's yours. Eight a week."

"Really? Thanks!"

"And we'll have plenty of work for a while, too. City's just given us the contract to build the new high school. Okay, get moving, kid."

Still bemused, Xander did.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander and Spike celebrated the purchase of a new—well, gently used—Toyota the same way they'd celebrated Xander's raise and Spike's decision to give up cigarettes and Anya's announcement that she'd be moving out. Sex. Lots of it; sweet and sweaty and just rough enough to please them both. To be honest, they celebrated Wednesdays with sex, and they celebrated reruns of *Law & Order* and the pizza being delivered in under thirty minutes and the arrival of the

electricity bill and the neighbors' dog not barking all day.

They celebrated a lot.

And they'd just finished celebrating Spike's successful handling of a load of laundry when there was a loud pounding on the door.

"Can I still eat Jehovah's Witnesses, pet?" Spike asked.

"Mmm...I'll think on it." Xander scrambled into his jeans, and Spike did likewise, only more gracefully.

Spike opened the door, and then jumped back quickly as Buffy marched in, followed by Willow and Giles, and an annoyed-looking Riley and slightly sheepish Tara. The visitors gave Spike and Xander very long looks, and Xander blushed as he was very aware that it was patently obvious what he and Spike had just been doing. And then Buffy's eyes narrowed as she took in the tiny wounds on Xander's neck and near his nipples.

"He bit you!" she said, and reached back for her stake.

Xander caught her wrist. “Just little nicks, Buff. He’s not exactly draining me.”

“Why are you letting him?”

Giles cleared his throat. “Erm, under the right circumstances, a vampire’s bite can be quite, erm, erotic. According to the texts,” he added maybe a little too hastily.

Spike folded his arms and smirked. “Peaches never showed off that little trick to you? Pity.”

Buffy sort of growled and wrenched her hand away. But before she could close the space between herself and Spike, Riley caught at her shoulders.

“Buff. This isn’t why we came here.”

She relaxed slightly and so did Xander. “Why *did* you come here, anyway? I take it it wasn’t to critique my sex life.”

“Nothing to critique,” Spike said, flinging an arm around Xander’s shoulders. His skin was still warm from heat he’d stolen from Xander. “You’re a marvel.”

Willow blushed and Tara hid a giggle behind one hand.

Buffy shook Riley off and lifted her chin. “We came to ask you for your help.”

That wasn’t what Xander had expected. He’d thought they were about to stage an intervention. “Help?”

“There’s a new monster in town. And he’s kicking my ass. He’s kicking our collective asses.”

“Yeah? What kind of monster?”

“It’s....” She glanced at Riley, who winced a little. “The Initiative made him.”

“Wankers,” Spike snarled.

“Well, pretty much,” Buffy said, agreeing with Spike for maybe the first time ever. “Adam’s sort of manufactured from pieces of demons and stuff. He’s smart and he’s strong. He killed that bitch Professor Walsh, he killed a little kid and some other people. He’s bad news, Xan.”

“Yeah, okay, I got that. Where do I come in?”

It was Willow who spoke next. “We need all the help we can get. We’re stronger with you on our side, and you know some soldiery stuff, and, and we miss you.”

Xander looked at them. Willow was making her best puppy-dog eyes, and Buffy had a half-smile. Giles was smiling, too. Tara had crept up close to Willow and she grinned shyly at him. Only Riley looked a little sulky, but Xander had a pretty good idea that Captain America would go along with whatever Buffy wanted.

Xander turned and looked at Spike, who had wrapped his arms around himself. Spike’s jaw was tightly set and he was clearly trying to look fierce, but Xander knew him too well now, and could see the vulnerability just beneath the surface, the fear of being hurt again by someone he loved.

When Xander grabbed Spike and pulled him close, Spike let out a long, noisy breath, and leaned against Xander as if his legs were a little wobbly.

“I’m willing,” Xander said. “Haven’t had a good beating in months. But if I come, Spike’s with me. A team. Two-for-one deal. That okay with you, Spike?”

Spike laughed a little. “Whither thou goest, pet.”

“I’m not sure Biblical allusions are appropriate under the circumstances,” Giles muttered, but nobody paid him any attention.

Xander said, “So, what do you say? Take us or leave us.”

The Scoobies all exchanged quick looks. And then Buffy smiled and nodded. “We’ll take you.”

Xander turned his head and gave Spike a big, noisy kiss on the temple. “I guess we’re back in the demon-killing biz.”

“I expect so,” Spike said with false misery and gave Xander’s ass a healthy squeeze. “Ought to have my head examined.”

The End