He was in Lisbon when he found the first body. It wasn’t his first body – he’d found that at the age of sixteen, when he’d discovered that you didn’t need super powers to raise the dead. But this time no amount of CPR would heal the damage. You can’t give someone the kiss of life when half their throat is missing.

He knew the brutality was deliberate. Everything else
had been done with delicacy and finesse; the placing of the body where he was sure to find it; the demure arrangement of hands and feet and the school skirt and blouse smoothed down, hugging every curve, hinting at the promise of bounty, but never revealing. But the wound, the wound told a different story. There was no care, no artistry, just the ragged, red ruin of jagged flesh and an impression of feeding and tearing and pain.

Xander didn’t know it then, but later he realised that was the start of the dizzying climb to the tipping point.

That was the start of the deaths.

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**Part One**

The small, rooftop bar was quiet when he emerged from the narrow, dark stairway that led up from the street. It was never really busy, not like the bars near the tourist attractions, because most of the coach parties didn’t tend to venture off the beaten track. But even at its
quietest, the bar was welcoming in a way that made him comfortable drinking alone without ever feeling lonely. It was peaceful enough that he could hear himself think if he wanted to, or just drift with the gentle heat of the late summer, Lisbon evening if he was so inclined.

That’s what he loved about the bar. There were no demands on his behavior. No one to tell him to do one thing or another – he could do what he pleased. It was such a tiny thing, but after so many years of conforming to expectation, he cherished the small freedoms that came from being able to do exactly as he pleased, even for a little while, and not feel any sense of obligation or guilt.

As he stepped over the lip of the last step and onto the terracotta patio, he paused, letting his eyes readjust to the brightness of the sun and glanced around, taking in the people at the few occupied tables and the bartender and waiter chatting quietly at the small, neat bar. He noticed that the far corner table by the wrought iron railing was empty and with a small, inward smile he ambled over and sank gracelessly into the rattan chair. It wasn’t the comfiest chair in the world, but after a day spent on his feet it felt like heaven and it gave him a great view over the rail to the city below.
A cold beer appeared in front of him and he glanced up and thanked the waiter. Nice to be recognised enough in a place that the barman would know exactly what he was going to order without being asked. Okay, it wasn’t a case of everyone knowing his name, but he’d been here often enough that the locals would nod and he would nod back and feel at ease.

He picked up his glass and relaxed. It was a good bar and god knows he was a connoisseur of dives from Tripoli to Tangier. Even better, it was Friday night so he wasn’t going to be drinking alone.

He’d only taken a few long, satisfying sips of his beer when she arrived. Dark hair and hazel eyes, her hips swayed provocatively as she crossed the small patio, waving cheerfully at the waiter who greeted her. Oh yeah, there was another reason why the waiter had been so prompt with bringing the beer. He’d known damn fine who the next person to come up the stairs would probably be.

She stood in front of Xander’s table for a moment, one eyebrow raised as she looked from him to the solitary beer on the table.
“Hey,” he said, raising one hand defensively. “I only got here a couple of minutes ago and Roberto just put this down. You said you might be late so there was no point in ordering you something just to have it get warm.” He smiled up at her in what he hoped was a winning manner and when the quick frown was followed by the indulgent shake of her head, he thought might actually be have succeeded. She stood for a moment longer as if she was considering making him sweat a bit more, but then stuck out her tongue, making her look all of seventeen and sank down into the neighbouring chair.

He let her settle then turned back to the waiter who was watching them with a grin on his face. “Hey Roberto. A beer for Melina, please.” He glanced back at his guest and then stage whispered. “Better make sure it’s extra cold.”

Roberto just snorted and bustled back towards the small bar at his back where a bottle of Super Bock and a chilled glass sat waiting on the counter. With the economy of long practice he swept the beer and glass onto the tray, threaded his way carefully back through the tables near the bar, and poured the beer into the glass with a flourish, placing it in front of her with a smile and a small
Xander watched the show, eyebrows raised. “You’ve got the moves, Roberto,” he said. “I don’t know how I’m going to follow that without making a complete fool of myself.”

The waiter shrugged and winked with the confidence of a man who had perfected the art of flirting before Xander was born, then bustled away to collect empty glasses from the nearby tables. Xander shook his head in mock despair before turning his attention back to his companion and raised his glass. She mirrored his movement, then leaned over and stole a quick, soft kiss.

“What was that for?”

“For not letting my beer get warm,” she murmur, and took a long, appreciative sip of her drink.

He opened his mouth and then shut it again, realizing that he was on a hiding to nothing and settled on taking a long swallow of his own beer. He closed his eye for a moment, letting his body relax with the sensation of the cold alcohol, the warm evening breeze and the smell of her perfume permeate his senses. Oh yeah, this was
definitely heaven.

When he opened his eye she was watching him with a quizzical look on her face.

“Okay, so I’m relaxed. Is that a bad thing?”

She smiled at him, her eyes fond and perhaps just a little bit sad. “No, Xander, it’s definitely not a bad thing. It’s nice to see you relaxed, but don’t get too comfortable. It’s nearly time to move on.”

“Yeah, I know.” He took another sip and rubbed his hand across his cheek right below his eye patch. “I don’t want to move. I’ve gotten comfortable here, you know.”

Setting down her own beer, she reached out and curled her fingers round his free hand. “I know. You’re relaxed now. Unwound. Not like the big watch spring you were a month ago, when you arrived.”

Her hand squeezed Xander’s lightly taking the sting out of her comment and he squeezed back, acknowledging the truth in her words. “Yeah, well, three months in Morocco getting slimed every other night by that nest of Mopsus isn’t exactly my idea of R&R. When Giles said he
wanted me to go to Marrakech, for one stupid moment I thought I’d won the lottery and a Council paid vacation all rolled into one. Should have known better, I guess.”

“Yes, you should. I know you and Mr Giles are close, but the Council isn’t exactly altruistic, even in these more enlightened days.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s me – born stupid, always stupid.”

She frowned and hit him lightly on the arm. “I think it’s more a case of ‘born hopeful, always hopeful’. Hope is a good thing, Xander. Don’t ever lose your hope.”

“And there’s a bumper sticker right there.” She hit him again and he smiled ruefully as he untangled his hand from hers and made a point of rubbing his arm. “Anyway, I can’t exactly complain. A month in Lisbon was a pretty good pay off. Great history, good food, cold beer, interesting places for the discerning tourist to visit and the chance to collect additions to Giles’ oversized library of musty old tomes.” He ticked the list off on his fingers, not looking at her, but he could almost feel her glare boring into him and he risked a quick glance up and yep, there it was.
Picking up his beer again, he took a fortifying slug and grinned at her. “Yep, lots of reasons to love Lisbon.” He waited for a beat. “Company’s been kind of nice, too.”

She shook her head, reaching out, as if to hug him, until at the last moment she changed the angle of her hand and swatted him firmly on the back of his head.

“Ouch, that hurt! The arm was bad enough, but you really need to be careful with my head. You’ll damage the brain cell. It’s only on loan, you know. I promised Willow I’d return it in one piece.”

She swatted him again and laughed as he whimpered theatrically. “It’s definitely time you got back into some serious work,” she scolded. “Many more days listening to you whine and I’ll be throwing myself off the nearest Miradouros that’s not swarming with tourists. Unless I decide to throw you off instead.”

“Oh come on Melina. You wouldn’t have me any other way.”

“And what does that say about me?”

“That you are a woman of impeccable taste. Or possibly
crazy. Either would work.”

“Finish your beer Xander and go home. I think you’ve had too much sun today.”

“A good Cali boy like me, no such thing as too much sun. But yeah, I think I’m going to head off. I’ve got a lot to do tomorrow, what with sorting the cheapest way to get to Jo’burg and all the fun stuff that comes with it. Got to keep the accountants happy, or in my case, Andrew, great keeper of the purse strings.”

She chuckled and he grinned at her before picking up his beer again, and dragging his thumb through the condensation on the outside of the glass. “Seriously though Melina. You’ve been great. I don’t know how I would have tracked down that Grimoire for Giles, without your help.”

“Don’t worry about it. I may not be in the Council’s inner circle, or even in their outer one, but I know what goes on in my city and I was very happy to be able to help. Anyway, helping you got me a little revenge on that little bastard Tiago. It’ll teach him to come onto my daughter, the dirty old man.”
Xander paused mid swallow, almost choking at the venom and satisfaction in her voice. “Yeah, well technically he’s a dirty old chaos mage, but I guess that’s splitting hairs. And splitting hairs is something he’s not going to be doing for a while, and I can’t really believe I just said that.”

She giggled as he blushed. “And on that note, I really am going,” he said. "Thank you for the company and for the pep talk. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

"You’ll see me tomorrow, Xander. Go sleep. Come join us for breakfast in the morning”

He rose creakily and stretched. “Can I walk you home?”

“Thank you, but no. I have some business with Roberto, so I’ll stay a while. Rosanna is at a friend’s house for dinner, so there is no need for me to rush back.”

“See, I knew Roberto was just waiting to make a move.” She laughed and he grinned back, waggling his eyebrows. “Give my love to Rosanna. Tell her I’ll see her tomorrow.”

“I’ll tell her. I know she’s looking forward to another lecture on the Harris method of getting out of doing
homework.”

“That’s what I like to hear, a teenager who knows how to learn from the voice of experience. I knew there was a reason I liked that girl.”

Grinning again, he ambled across the patio, down the narrow stairs and into the gathering twilight that had descended while they had chatted on the rooftop.

He knew he should do as Melina had directed and go back to the hotel and get some sleep, but once he left the bar he found that he was still restless and knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep yet, however tired he felt. He wandered aimlessly for a while, enjoying the fading warmth of the summer evening, letting his mind drift, it flitted from image to image from the last month – arriving in Lisbon from Morocco desperate for a rest, but knowing he still had a job to do. Making contact with Melina who had her finger on the pulse of the darker side of the city without being swallowed by it. Snapshots of family dinners and telling tall tales to Rosanna while Melina looked on and shook her head, mingled with memories of forays down side streets and dark alleys and small curious shops with strange merchandise and oddly comforting smells.
The Grimoire had been fairly easy to track down once he’d got a sniff of the chaos mage, and wasn’t that the image to conjure with? Stupid old man, sending a fifteen year old girl love notes was just asking for trouble, especially when the fifteen year old in question had a mama bear like Melina. He’d only gone along as the muscle when she’d gone to confront Tiago and it was one of those random moments that seemed to sum up his life, when he realised the old weasel was the guy that Giles had sent him to find. Giles would call it serendipity, but Xander knew better. He could look back along the strings that made up his life, from the first time he’d met Willow, to the day he’d brought Buffy back to life and on to the day he’d left Anya at the altar, and beyond. It was all connected – one long road that led to now, and that now would lead to the future, whatever that was meant to be. He shivered and pushed his hair back out of his eye, trying to brush off the weight of his thoughts and think of lighter things. The mission was accomplished. The Grimoire was on its way to Giles, courtesy of the Willow express, and for the last week he’d switched off his phone, knowing the Council could get him by more esoteric means if it was urgent. He’d kicked back and enjoyed the city, the sights and the feel of a warm, soft body when Melina felt inclined to share. Yes, it had
definitely been a good week.

As he carefully descended one of the steep stepped alleyways that peppered the Alfama he smiled again at the thought of Melina and Rosanna and the stupidity of an old man in heat. His life was definitely weird, but he realised that he wouldn’t have it any other way. Normality was over-rated and he acknowledged that, even given the choice, he’d never turn his back on the life he now led. The thought brought him back to earth and he knew that he would have to think about tomorrow when he’d switch on his cell and get back to work.

When he came to the broad platform half way down the stairs he stopped to button his jacket against the cooling evening breeze and, as he looked round to get his bearings, he realised that, without thinking, his wanderings had taken him to the narrow alley that led to the small forgotten courtyard he’d adopted as his thinking spot. Nestled against the barred, back gate to a crumbling mansion that was testament to a grand past, a sorry present and an uncertain future, the courtyard was always empty, as if it was always waiting just for him. It was a fanciful notion, but one that appealed to him when he let his thoughts wander in the middle of the night. He
paused at the entrance to the alley, his Sunnydale senses automatically scanning for danger in the dark, but the evening was quiet and with a mental shrug of his shoulders, he decided to visit the spot one last time and contemplate the weeks gone by and the weeks to come. He stiffened when he reached the end of the alley; the silence was broken by footsteps echoing in the silent night, but then the quiet returned and he acknowledged a momentary selfish thought that he was glad that whoever had been there had left from the alleyway at the other side, leaving him to enjoy the solitude and peace.

The courtyard was lit only by the windows of the tall buildings hemming it in on all sides. As with every visit he looked up, following the tangle of heavy scented climbers that clung to the masonry, invading each crack as if they were trying to reclaim their city from the hordes of stone invaders. As always his gaze finally reached the windows and he searched for signs of life, for someone who would chase him off for trespassing, but the windows stayed blank, the lights shone from within, but any observers remained unseen or uninterested in anything beyond their own walls.

An old stone fountain stood in the middle of the small
square, its bowl bereft of any hint of water as a result of the long hot summer, and the gifts of a thousand birds made the grey stone look like marble in the faded light. Since the day he’d stumbled across the courtyard and sat on the edge of the fountain, in the shade of high walls to escape the heat of the afternoon sun, it had become his private spot, a sanctuary from the tourists and the bustle of both the upper and underworlds of the city.

He was ambling towards the fountain, enjoying the silence, when a flurry of birds rose from the roof top above him and he looked up again, following their flight until they disappeared into the twilight. The stars hung like crystals in the blue velvet sky and closing his eye he took a deep breath of the heady flower scent of magnolia, jasmine and rose. The birds were gone and the silence soothed him and he opened his eye and continued his journey round the edge of the fountain and stumbled as his toe caught the edge of something soft.

Two small tanned feet, shod in flat summer sandals were crossed demurely at the ankle. His eye travelled upwards along long, tanned legs to where a black skirt was smoothed chastely just above scraped knees. He didn’t want to look further, but forced his gaze onwards, up over a white school blouse, embroidered with red
poppies around the buttons. Black and white and red – in any other world these were a demure school uniform with just a hint of mischief, but here in death, they had become funeral clothes and he felt his head start to swim at the thought.

Her face was turned away, her black hair swept up and to the side so there was no doubt how she died – savagely, brutally, the edges of torn flesh jagged and raw, blood pooled and dripping into the hollow of her throat and along her collarbone. Taking a deep breath, he bent down, gently turned her head and froze, his hand tangled in her thick dark hair.

Rosanna.

Xander jerked back and stumbled to the corner of the courtyard, throwing up the earlier beer. His brain tumbled with the images of a teenage girl in shorts and a yellow t-shirt seated at the breakfast table chewing on the end of a pencil and asking for his help with her homework after he’d slipped from the warmth of her mother’s bed. Oh Christ, Melina! What the hell could he say to Melina? His stomach heaved again and an owl screeched somewhere above him in the dark.
A/N: The Alfama is the oldest district of Lisbon. Miradouros are viewpoints – Lisbon is built on seven hills and there are viewpoints on every hill.

Part Two

He was relieved that it was only a short taxi ride to Santa Apolónia Station. It didn’t give him time to think and, god knows, thinking was something he was studiously avoiding right now. The taxi weaved in and out of the narrow streets that characterized so much of the Alfama and he stared out of the window, vaguely registering the cafes and shops that he’d become so familiar with over the last month. His cell rang insistently but he ignored it, just like he’d done the last ten times it had rung. He knew he should answer it, that it might be important, but at that moment he found he really didn’t care.

They screeched to a halt outside of the station and glancing at the meter, Xander hauled a few grubby Euros out of his pocket and handed them over to the driver,
before opening the door and grabbing his rucksack. Shutting the door, he turned to face the front of the station and after a quick look around, he strode towards the entrance to the concourse.

The station had the same buzz and chaos that all good international launch pads had and he knew that if he’d been there just a few days before he’d feel nothing but excitement at the prospect of the trip to come. Cars were familiar, the birthright of every good American teen, and planes had become a necessity over the last few years, as he’d travelled on behalf of the Council. But trains, trains were exotic in a way that he couldn’t quite express. There was a sensation of travelling, rather than just departing and arriving. On a train he really felt like he was making a journey and there was time to look about him, talk to people and enjoy himself in a way he could never do in a car or plane. That is how he would have felt just a few days before, but now it was a means to an end just like any other form of transportation. He had a feeling that he’d never feel the same way about train travel again.

He stood in front of the board, checking to see if the Madrid train had a platform displayed. There was nothing yet, but then he knew he was early and wasn’t
really surprised. The P.A. above his head announced arrivals and departures and he stood listening, marveling how anyone made out a word being said when the announcer sounded like he was practicing for a gig hosting WWF.

The noise from the P.A. died down but almost immediately it was replaced by the insistent sound of the Ride of the Valkyrie coming from his inside jacket pocket. He thought of Dawn, giggling as she reprogrammed his phone, telling him it was ironic to have the music from Apocalypse Now as his ring tone and how Giles had rolled his eyes as he pointed out that Wagner had got there a few years before Coppola had come on the scene. Deciding he couldn’t ignore it any longer, he dumped his rucksack on the dusty, stone floor, fished in his jacket pocket for his phone and was surprised to see Giles number on the display. He closed his eye, took a deep breath before opening it and deliberately pressing the little green phone symbol.

“Hey Giles,” he said cautiously, knowing that the Chief Watcher had an uncanny way of knowing exactly what Xander was thinking, even at a distance. It was something that had crept up on both of them over the years and Xander sometimes thought with amusement
that he was very glad Giles hadn’t had that particular skill when they were back in high school.

“Xander. Good, I’m glad I caught you.” Giles’ voice was warm, but Xander didn’t miss the hint of caution and concern colouring his tone as he spoke. Giles wasn’t the only one who’d become good at reading people. Xander had become very adept at interpreting Giles-speak, even with very few cues and working without a safety net, and the cautious greeting shrieked of an impending ‘serious conversation’. Time to head that one off at the pass.

“You definitely caught me, Giles. Not like I’m going anywhere. Well actually I am going somewhere, that’s why I’m in a train station, but I’m not going anywhere in the sense that I’m here and you don’t get rid of me that easily and you do know I can hear you polishing your glasses, even at this distance!”

There was a slight pause at the other end and he could almost imagine Giles pinching the bridge of his nose as he often did when trying to work out some of the more labyrinthine comments from one of the gang. “Yes, well some habits only manifest when they’re given certain triggers and I can honestly say that hearing you in full flow is one thing guaranteed to bring out that particular
response. And Xander, you aren’t the only one who can judge things from a distance. So are you going to tell me why you are at a station? I thought you were getting a flight out of Lisbon, not taking the train.”

Damn, so much for heading off the serious conversation.

Xander looked around him at the milling crowds of tourists and fellow travelers and with a quick, “hang on, Giles,” he jammed his phone hard against his ear and picking up his pack, started towards the back of the hall, where hopefully it was a little quieter, and as private as a public departure hall could be. He dropped his pack on the floor and leaned back against an inviting stone pillar, letting the solid surface take his weight. He could hear Giles clearing his throat at the other end of the line and all of a sudden he realised that talking to Giles was probably the best thing he could do. Xander knew Giles would be British and Watchery and objective and right now he needed someone not be emotional – he was handling that end of the deal on his own just fine. “Sorry about that,” he said. “Just needed to get out from under the P.A. Couldn’t hear myself think, never mind hear what you’re saying. So yeah, train station... right, well I decided flying wasn’t the best exit strategy under the circumstances.”
“Circumstances? Xander what circumstances?” The tentative concern he’d identified in Giles’ voice at the start of the conversation now manifested itself as out and out worry.

“Christ Giles. It was awful. She was only fifteen.”

“Ah, I take it you are talking about Melina’s daughter, yes? I was incredibly sorry to hear about that. I remember her as a very lively child.”

“Yeah, well, it’s been a long time since you were last in Lisbon. She’s quite the lively teenager…” He paused, swallowing hard before he continued. “She was quite the lively teenager. God, Giles, she was alive two days ago. I had a beer with Melina in the evening and I said I’d see her and Rosanna the next day. I had an invitation to breakfast. But now she’s dead and there’ll be no more breakfasts.” He flashed again to the scene in the courtyard and the image of small feet in brown leather sandals swam in his mind. He wouldn’t let himself visualize the rest of the scene, but it was enough to make him slide down the edge of the pillar until he was sprawled on the floor regardless of the dust and the cigarette butts. “Now she’s dead. She had her throat torn
out. I know, we see a lot of death in this line of work, so I don’t know why it’s got to me, apart from the obvious. I guess I’m used to teenage girls being all super strong and able to defend themselves and even when they die, they go out fighting. It’s a shock to get reminded that they’re not all like that.”

Giles' sigh echoed over the airwaves and at that moment Xander felt like he could reach out and touch him. “Xander you don’t think this is your fault, do you? No, scratch that. Of course you think it’s your fault.”

Xander’s mouth twisted in a small, sour smile as he realised again how well Giles knew him – knew them all. The thought should have been comforting, but it really didn’t help. “I saw them nearly every day. They wouldn’t let me fester away in my hotel room, or stumble about Lisbon on my own. I got invited to dinners and picnics and stuff. But at the same time I was doing work for the Council and stirring up crap. She’d survived fifteen years without being hurt. I come along and she gets attacked. Why would I possibly think that it’s my fault?”

And there was another Gilesian sigh, right on cue. “Xander, Melina has known about the supernatural since she was a child. She may not work for the Council, but
she understands the way the underbelly of the city works. She knows who the players are and by definition they know her. She brought up Rosanna to know about the things that go on in the dark and to be careful. Her death is horrible and tragic, just like all the other deaths we grieve over, but that does not make it your fault.”

“But...” He knew logically that Giles was right, but knowing and feeling were two entirely different things.

“But nothing. Does Melina blame you?” Okay, now there was the prize-winning question.

“Yes. No. Sort of. She was numb when I left. It was like she was autopilot, just lifeless and acting on instinct. I know we’ve all been there, but she wouldn’t let me help. I couldn’t comfort her. She wouldn’t let me comfort her.”

As he talked, he realised that at some point he’d started to cry and he brushed off a stray tear with the back of his hand and sniffed as a thought struck him. “Umm, so how did you know about Rosanna?”

“I have my sources, Xander. Melina may not be Council, but I have known her for years.” He paused for a moment, like he was framing what he was going to say
next. “If it makes you feel any better, I tried to phone her, but she’s not talking to me either. But that is part of grieving. She’ll talk when she’s ready.”

“Yeah, I guess. It doesn’t help right now, but I’ll deal. It’s not like we have any choice, right?”

“Very true. I’m sorry if I sound callous, Xander, but you’re right. There’s nothing we can do for Rosanna and Melina isn’t yet ready to be helped. Life goes on in the midst of death. You know this. So at the risk of sounding pedantic, why are taking the train out of Lisbon instead of flying?”

“It just seemed more discreet, somehow. I’ve ruffled a few feathers over the last month and I didn’t want to get anyone else hurt. So I thought taking the low profile exit was the thing to do.”

“I think possibly that a high profile exit might have emphasized that you were leaving and placated whoever did this, if indeed it was targeted at you or at the Council, which as I say, I doubt. However I defer to your local knowledge on the most appropriate response. But I must reiterate that whatever the reason it happened, that doesn’t make this your fault. If I was to hazard a guess at blame, I’d be inclined to point the finger at Tiago. A
slighted chaos mage would be capable of holding a rather large grudge.”

Xander cracked a small smile at the subtext. “And you’d know all about that.” Okay, bait the Watcher – always a good diversionary tactic when you want to derail a serious conversation.

“You can stop that line of thinking, right there. You do realise that you won’t always be at a distance and I have a very good memory.” Okay, it worked nine times out of ten, but evidently not this time as Giles continued, “All I am saying is that there are many reasons that it might have happened and 99 per cent of them have nothing to do with you. In all probability it was a horrible coincidence.”

“And the fact that I found her?” He pulled his knees up until he was tucked up in as small a ball as a nearly six foot, one eyed man could manage. If people looked at him funny then he’d ignore them, it wasn’t as if he didn’t have enough practice.

“Harder to reconcile, I agree. But would you rather she’d been found by a stranger. Or by Melina?”
“God no!” The idea of Melina finding the body made his stomach heave again.

“So be grateful for the coincidences that sometimes occur.”

“Yeah, I guess. You know I hate it when you’re all common sense man.” Even as he was letting Giles persuade him, a small voice reminded him that he didn’t believe in coincidences, but he shoved the thought in a box, slammed the lid and allowed Giles to comfort him. “Um Giles, now that you’ve persuaded me that not everything in the world is my fault, why exactly are you phoning me?” It occurred to him that he should have probably asked that question up front, but he’d been too busy trying not to have an emotional meltdown to be totally rational. He was just grateful that Giles seemed to understand and take the question at face value.

“It is rather serendipitous that you aren’t flying. I need you to go to Venice.”

“Venice? What about Jo’burg? Not that I’m not grateful for not having to spend twelve hours cooped up in a tin can.”
“I’ve asked Robin to experience that dubious pleasure. He’s on his way to the airport now. Things have escalated over there. Faith was hurt trying to clean out one of the courts there. Not badly, but her local support has decided on what they have described as a ‘tactical withdrawal’.

Xander could picture Giles’ expression of distaste at the description. “They did a runner, didn’t they?”

“That is another way of putting it,” Giles acknowledged. “Faith needs back up urgently and I couldn’t afford the time it would take you to fly from Lisbon and get your connecting flights.”

“So it’s Robin to the rescue. Good thing I hadn’t left then.” He knew he sounded snarky, but at that moment he didn’t have the energy to care.

“I did try to phone earlier, but you weren’t answering your phone. And Xander, being rude to me isn’t going to bring Rosanna back.” The bite in Giles voice was an echo of misadventures in the library years before and Xander couldn’t help but smile as he slid back momentarily into guilty student mode.
“I know. I’m sorry for sounding bitchy about Robin. And sorry for not answering the phone. Didn’t really feel like talking to anyone and I knew that if you really needed to get me, there were other methods.”

“Forgive me for choosing the mundane option over the arcane.”

Xander bit back a laugh before replying. “Okay, point taken. So what’s in Venice?”

“Spike’s in Venice.”

“And the fun keeps on coming,” Xander said, banging his head back against the pillar.

“I’m sorry Xander, I know you and Spike don’t really see eye to eye.” Xander snorted at the comment but congratulated himself that he didn’t make the obvious pun. The pause at the other end told him that Giles had just realised what he’d said and was waiting for the comment that didn’t come and they played chicken with the silence for a few seconds more before Giles continued with just a hint of embarrassment in his voice. “Spike has a lead on a companion volume to the Grimoire you found and I’m hopeful that he will have
secured it by the time you arrive in Venice. It is not the kind of thing he can send in the post.”

“What about the Willow express? Actually don’t even answer that. You’re just going to give me the whole mundane/arcane shtick again, aren’t you?”

“You know me too well.” The tone of Giles voice was so deadpan that Xander found himself desperately missing him and realised that he really had been travelling for far too long. “Besides, as far as I can understand, the two volumes act as some kind of lock and key. The one you acquired in Lisbon was the lock and the Venice volume is the key. I don’t want to tamper with it magically without understanding the ramifications, so it really does need to be couriered in person.”

“Okay, I’ll all for not tampering with magical ramifications. So getting back to the point: Robin’s going to Jo’burg and I’m bound for Venice.” He paused for a moment as a really nasty thought occurred to him. ‘Hmm, Giles, this isn’t some ham fisted bit of Machiavellian manipulation to get me and the bleached wonder talking again is it?”

He could almost hear Giles rolling his eyes at the
question. “Of course, Xander, I regularly arrange world ending crisis around the need to sort out the infantile bickering of everyone I know. Personally I’d rather you and Spike could be in the same room without needling each other and making the rest of us miserable, but I’ve come to terms with the fact that it’s too much to ask. All I will ask is that you go to Venice, pick up the book, once Spike has tracked it down, and bring it back to London.”

“Okay, okay, no need for sarcasm!” The P.A. screeched raucously and he listened with half an ear as Giles continued to tell him about the book while he scanned the departure board, watching the digital display as it flickered and changed. “Giles, I’ve got to go. They’ve just put up a platform number so the hordes will be gathering. I’ll get a cheap flight from Madrid to Venice and I’ll call you when I’ve collected the merchandise.” He paused for a second, “And I promise I’ll be good.”

An exasperated snort echoed down the phone. “Thank you, Xander. A modicum of decorum is all I require. Have a good trip and please, grieve for Rosanna and for Melina’s loss, but don’t blame yourself.”

“Yeah, okay.” He felt the lightness that talking to Giles had created, evaporate, but Giles was still on the end on
the phone and couldn’t actually see him, so he put on his best Scooby voice and hoped for the best, even though he knew damn fine that Giles would see right through him. “Thanks Giles; it was good to talk. Sorry I didn’t answer my cell before. I’ll see you in a few days.” Pressing the end key on his phone and stuffing it in his jacket pocket, Xander picked up his pack and headed for the train. First Madrid, then Venice, then London, ignoring the annoying vampire and collecting the inevitably musty tome in the process. It would give him something to focus on that wasn’t related to death.

Part Three

The Council base in Venice was in the northernmost historic district of the city, or at least that was how the dog eared guidebook jammed in one of the many side pocket of Xander’s rucksack, described it. But one of the things he’d learned the first time he had gone there, was that the city was so much more than the guide book. It was more than Saint Marks Square and over-priced
coffee, gondolas and a thousand other tourist images from magazines and movies and books. Venice had texture and flavor and the sweet, sour smell of people living too closely together. Xander still isn’t quite sure why he was surprised by that. It was a city, like any other city, but the chocolate box scenes of canals and crumbling grandeur had created an image in his mind that had more to do with museums and time capsules than it did with the day to day minutiae of living.

But living was what gave Venice both joy and mystery – the chugging of the boats on the waterways; the sound of shoppers bargaining in the markets; the long lines of tourists waiting to be herded to the next glass blowing workshop and the silent side alleys and delicately arched bridges that led to forgotten churches and the heady scent of bougainvillea perfuming the air around lovers oblivious to anything except their own private world. This was the Venice he’d come to know and to treasure, even on his few brief visits. He knew that he had only scratched the surface, but Venice was like Salome with her seven veils, always teasing and enticing with secrets yet to be revealed. He’d promised himself that one of these days when the world wasn’t ending, he was going to come to Venice on his own dime and allow himself the luxury of getting lost, just for a little while.
But now was not that time. The world wasn’t ending, but there was a mystical book to collect and an irritating vampire to deal with, so the heart of Venice with all its mysteries and temptations would have to wait for another time.

The most northern district was known as the Cannaregio Sestieri, a name that rolled around on his tongue like really good chocolate at the end of a long day. The Council's house sat just back from a small stone walkway, overlooking the small harbour of the Sacca della Misericordia. Xander paused at the edge of the water, gazing past the myriad moored boats towards the island of San Michele – The Island of the Dead. Considering the life he led, he’d had to laugh at the irony the first time he’d looked out over the view. Irony was one of the things that made life worth living, but since Andrew was responsible for finding the property when the Council had realised that they needed a base in the city, Xander wondered if ignorance rather than irony had been the order of the day.

He knew he was being unfair. Andrew had actually carved a niche for himself in the new Council and while his sense of dramatic flair remained undimmed, it was
tempered these days by a surprising efficiency when it came to the logistics of who was where and needed what. The fact that he’d taken to hailing Giles as El Capitan after watching a rerun of La Bamba was also a point in his favour, but Xander wouldn’t admit that to anyone, short of Willow doing a truth spell.

He pulled his gaze away from the island cemetery and climbed the few, shallow steps to the house he’d call home for at least the next twenty four hours. The door was dark wood, surrounded by faded, coral-pink bricks, many of which were crumbling at the corners. The brickwork stopped several feet above the door and was replaced by faded ochre plaster that was dotted with shuttered windows and impossible balconies hanging, seemingly unsupported, in space. They pulled his gaze up and up towards the rooftop and the corroded guttering, peppered with unexpected vegetation and the leavings of a thousand pigeons. He shivered as he remembered a flock of birds spiraling out of sight over the courtyard in Lisbon and he shoved the thought sideways and pulled his attention back to the present.

Xander ran his hand appreciatively over the solid wood of the door, loving the feeling of security and comfort that the heavy timber gave him. He stood, regaining his
equilibrium before pulling on the heavy chain hanging at the side of the door that he knew would resonate down in the lower floors of the building and bring someone to let him in. He wondered who it would be – Rosa, who sometimes helped with the cooking if the house was fully occupied, or perhaps Cosima, the fledging wiccan currently learning her craft in the city. Then there was Gabriella, the watcher from an aristocratic family that was as old as Venice itself. He hoped it wasn’t Gabriella. Her patrician airs would have sat well with the Council of Travers and his ilk, but she made Xander feel inadequate and just a little shoddy. Anyway, it was unlikely that she would lower herself to acting as butler, unless there was no else to do the job. Gabriella was far too used to having a butler of her own. If he was pushed, he’d have to say that he hoped Annunciata would open the door – there was something quite wonderful about being welcomed by someone who, by definition, was going to announce that he’d arrived. The fact that she didn’t mind him asking silly questions, like why all Italian girls’ names seemed to end in ‘A’, was just a bonus in Xander’s mind.

In the time it took his butterfly brain to sift through his thoughts, there was an echo of footsteps on tile on the other side of the door and the sound of a key turning in a lock. Xander stepped back down a step, picked up his
pack and smiled as the heavy door swung open and Annunciata stood in the doorway beaming at him.

“Alessandro, you are welcome back to us.” He noted with approval that she didn’t invite him in, but stood with her arms held out and he took the last step over the threshold and opened himself to her welcoming hug. An Annunciata hug was definitely something to treasure.

“Hey, Annunciata.” He allowed himself to rest in her warm embrace for a moment and then extracted himself reluctantly. “You look well. Angelo still courting you, is he? Tell him that he’d better be treating you well, or he’ll have me to answer to.”

“I’m sure that will have him shaking in his shoes, Harris. Reckon the minute we got a whiff of you inside the city limits, six foot plus of pork butcher took himself off into hiding to stop being threatened by your manly presence.” The voice was as full of snark as always and the vampire attached to it leaned against the door to the library looking as supercilious as ever.

“Spike! Pleasure to see you, as always. Only not.”

Annunciata looked from one to the other, a severe
expression on her face that Xander thought most of her family must be intimately familiar with. “Boys, you will behave yourself. I won’t have fighting under this roof.”

Spike looked cowed for all of five seconds while Xander did a mental countdown to the inevitable reply. “We could go somewhere else and do it, if you like?”

Annunciata raised her hands heavenwards, as if asking for strength, and then with one swift stride, she reached out and batted the vampire on the side of the head. “Enough. I have spoken to Mr Giles on the telephone and he told me you two were going to be annoying. There is no need to prove him right in the first few minutes.

“Sorry love, habit you know.” The annoying vampire didn’t look in the least contrite and Xander gave way to the temptation to join in.

“Yeah, sorry. Actually, a few minutes is pretty good for us. I’ve seen things deteriorate in under thirty seconds, so you must be a good influence.”

The expression that flitted across her expressive face spoke of an internal struggle to reply, against not replying, and in the end the desire not to bank the fires
of their childish bickering obviously won out. “You are a pair of overgrown children, you know that?” She shook her head disapprovingly, but there was a smile lurking at the corner of her mouth as she wiped her hands on the edge of her apron and beckoned to a small boy with a mop of dark curls, who was standing shyly by the bottom of the stairs. “Alessandro, this is my nephew, Ilario. He is hiding from his mother today to avoid getting a haircut, so I’ve put him to work to keep him out of mischief. He can show you where you will be sleeping tonight and run any errands you need. I expect you to be on your best behavior because I do not need him learning any more bad habits than he already has, or I will never hear the end of it from his mother!”

Xander grinned at her, nodded to the boy and told himself that he wouldn’t be asking for anything other than directions to the bedroom and the nearest shower. High school days were long behind him, but the idea of using the child as an errand boy, cut far too close to home.

A long, hot shower, a nap and a clean set of clothes made him feel like a new man. Or at least, perhaps, more like someone you’d find in a half decent consignment store, instead of the human equivalent of something you’d pick
up in a fairly dodgy Goodwill. He cleaned his teeth, secretly sympathized with the truant Ilario as he gave up trying to make his hair look respectable, and carefully repacked everything, dirty clothes included, back into his rucksack before muttering a short, simple, protection spell that Willow had made him painstakingly memorise when he first started travelling. He knew that he was being paranoid, especially since he was in the confines of a Council base, but paranoia had kept him alive through Africa and some of the more dubious parts of Europe, so he wasn’t about to muck around with a tried and trusted formula, however safe his current digs seemed to be. His secret for survival was to be prepared and among other things, that meant being able to move in a hurry when things went to crap, and to never leave things lying around where curious eyes and fingers could meddle in his business.

Everything arranged to his satisfaction, Xander took a deep breath, opened the door and walked carefully down the broad, sweeping staircase that dominated the hall. As he reached the bottom, Ilario straightened up from his half slouch in the deep, leather, porter’s chair by the front door and at Xander’s questioning look, jerked his head to the door at the end of the long hallway. With a nod of thanks and another sigh, Xander squared his
shoulders and made his way past the paintings of long ago sea battles and portraits of people whose names he would have no hope of pronouncing, even if he knew who they were. The door was open just an inch and he could hear Spike doing his best guttersnipe impression, contrasting sharply with a bored and well bred tone that could only be produced at an exclusive English girl’s school. Oh joy, he thought, Spike and Gabriella in one room, just what the doctor really didn’t order.

Realising that Spike would already know he was outside, he discarded the fleeting idea of turning tail and pushing the door open, walked into the room. Spike was standing with his back to a heavily curtained window, his trademark black and red contrasting with the rich cream and yellow velvet of the drapes. The inevitable cigarette dangled precariously from the edge of his mouth and Xander realised that if it wasn’t for the richness of the surroundings, he could be looking at a scene from any year of his life since he was seventeen.

Spike looked casual and relaxed. Xander’s thoughts paused on the word ‘louche’ and he considered it for a moment. Louche – ‘dubious and shady’ – yeah that was Spike to a tee. It had always bothered Xander that someone like that could worm his way into the heart of
the Scoobies and still be there after all these years. He knew all the arguments about the soul and saving the world and he’d taken them on board, but when it came down to it, whenever they met, they were like oil and water – their personalities too different for anything better than a grudging and precarious truce.

Louche was definitely not a word to be used in describing Gabriella. Tall, thin and impeccably dressed from her immaculate hair to the bottom of her undoubtedly expensive Italian shoes. If pressed he’d take a punt on them being Ferragamo, because the first time they’d met she’d taken great pleasure in enlightening him about the cost of a proper Italian shoe when he’d had the cheek to say that her shoes reminded him of a pair that Dawn had back in London. The comparison between the high street and designer wear had not gone down well. She’d also taken the time to touch on her family’s contribution to Venetian history, her own education at Roedean, her law degree from the University of Florence – it was her small rebellion against her family in Venice - and finally her role as Watcher to the Venice chapter of the Council. Yep, she oozed old money and her accent made Xander think of having tea with the Queen of England, if the Queen was 5 foot 8 and had a cut glass accent steeped in Amaretto. Secretly he suspected the Queen was probably
more laid back.

Gabriella sat on an elegant, deep burgundy leather club chair on the far side of the fireplace and Xander noted that she not only looked like she was granting an audience, strategically she could see every entrance and exit and keep her eye on Spike, without making a move. Her back was straight, her ankles neatly crossed and her hands, tipped with an immaculate French manicure lay along the arms of the chair. Xander realised that he really had spent far too long around girls when he could recognise a specific type of manicure when he saw it, but that was a tidbit he thought he’d be better keeping to himself. Ignoring Spike, Xander approached her with his hand outstretched. “Gabriella, a pleasure to see you, as always.” He heard Spike snort at his back, but concentrated on the woman in front of him. Xander knew who he was more intimidated by.

She inclined her head, queen to courtier, or possibly supplicant, but she didn’t take his outstretched hand, so he withdrew it and jammed it in his pocket where it couldn’t get him into trouble. “Alexander,” she acknowledged. “Mr Giles said you were on your way. I notice you have your usual timing of arriving just before supper.”
Xander nodded and made a fist with the hand in his pocket. Gabriella could give Spike lessons on how to mock with finesse. He knew better than to cross swords with her, she was far the better fencer, both with words and with steel, so he instead he opted for some standard self deprecation. “You know what they say: an army marches on its stomach.”

“Yeah, and with the amount you put away, Harris, I’m surprised we haven’t lost the war years ago.”

“You know, us humans have this quirky thing called hunger and we need feeding to keep our strength up. You scoff the free food because it’s there and because you can. You don’t actually need it, what with being dead and all.”

Spike oozed over from his position by the window, every move liquid, and despite his automatic irritation with more or less everything Spike did, Xander was honest enough to admit to himself that Spike had a grace that he had only ever managed when he was possessed. Even Gabriella, for all her deportment, couldn’t match the vampire when he was determined to put on a show. It was only a handful of steps between the window to
where Xander stood, but he knew Spike was milking them for everything he could get before he stopped in front of Xander and took a long pull on his cigarette. “Oh, I know about hunger, mate. With vampires, it’s all about the hunger.” His eyes wandered slowly down Xander’s body and then back up, lingering briefly on his neck before holding his gaze and not for the first time, or the hundredth, in all his years of dealing with Spike, Xander felt like a piece of prime rib on a butcher’s slab. The moment stretched and Xander stared into blue eyes, inwardly cursing the way Spike could get under his skin. The annoying vampire took another drag of his cigarette and smiled. “Of course, I’ve got some standards and there are some folk I wouldn’t lower myself to bite, didn’t matter how hungry I was.” He turned toward the fire burning in the grate and pitched the butt of his fag into the embers.

The movement gave Xander a chance to regroup. “Yeah, well, you’re not going to get the chance. I might be a little proletarian for some people’s tastes.” He shot a sideways glance at Gabriella but she looked at him impassively even as Spike snorted. “But I do have some standards.”

Spike did the eyebrow thing that always made Xander
want to punch him. “Sure you do. And now that you’ve parroted out your word of the day, maybe we can get down to business.”

Xander took a deep breath, but before he could formulate a hopefully witty and cutting reply, Gabriella intervened. “I think that is an excellent idea,” she said. “I believe Rosa has laid out supper in the dining room, so perhaps we could save the rest of this pleasant debate until we have eaten, then we can discuss the transportation of the book back to Mr Giles in a civilised manner.”

Without waiting for a reply she rose gracefully from her seat, turned and stalked towards the small door at the other end of the room and exited without a backward glance. Xander waited a beat to see if Spike would say anything else, but the vampire just smirked and followed her, leaving Xander to sigh and play a quick mental game of ‘anywhere but here’ in his head before following.

**Part Four**

Despite all the auguries to the contrary, supper was a reasonably subdued and civilised affair and the talk was as small as three people who disliked each other could make it. Most of the attention was given to the food and
that suited Xander just fine. Rosa wasn’t present in the dining room, but Xander could tell by the Venetian style liver on the hotplate that she was definitely present in the kitchen. There was a time when he would have laughed at anyone who suggested that he’d voluntarily eat liver, and go back for seconds, but the last time he’d been in Venice she had broken him down with a soft smile and a pleading look, until he’d weakened and tasted her specialty. One bite of the melt-in-the-mouth liver, served with a mound of sweet, slow cooked onions and a side dish of polenta, and he was hooked. Now, over a year later, the dish still tasted as wonderful as he remembered.

The plate of frijoles was a perfect follow up and he tamped down his feelings about Gabriella and Spike for a few minutes as he munched his way through a small mound of the tasty, handmade fritters. Anything that looked vaguely doughnut like was always going to be a win in his book and he merely rolled his eyes and kept on eating when Spike made a barbed comment about not being able to take the doughnut boy out of the Hellmouth.

Finally, the food was finished, the platitudes exhausted and Ilario had paid his dues to his aunt by helping her
clear away the empty plates and serving dishes. Before she left, Annunciata served coffee and offered cognac as an accompaniment. Xander declined the alcohol, feeling that he needed to be on his toes in the present company. But he wasn’t surprised when both Gabriella and Spike accepted, although he did half expect Spike to ask for his usual JD. It didn’t happen and Xander smiled inwardly at the thought that Spike was probably just as intimidated by Gabriella as he was, even if he wouldn’t actually admit it.

He sat back in his seat, resisting the temptation to loosen his belt because of the inevitable snark that would follow, and looked over at Spike who was sitting at the end of the table. Gabriella, naturally, sat at the head. “Okay, so now we can get down to business. Giles said you had a lead on the companion to the Grimoire I collected in Lisbon. When do you think you’ll be able to get your hands on it?”

Spike inspected the polish on his nails and took a lingering sniff of his cognac before he replied. “Behind the times, ain’t you, mate? Got the book, all right and tight. Nothing to it. Not when you know what you’re doing.” He paused, and took a delicate sip of his drink before looking Xander in the eye. “Didn’t even get
“What the hell!” Xander’s first instinct was to hit Spike, or at least attempt to, for the blatant sneer, but gripping the arms of the chair, he reminded himself that Spike was being Spike and was trying to provoke a reaction, and that Gabriella wouldn’t take kindly to a brawl in her dining room. At least not until the servants had gone to bed. He took a deep breath to get his temper under control and refused to rise to the bait. “How did you know about that?” he said softly.

Spike was smirking, obviously knowing he’d scored a direct hit, even if Xander hadn’t actually reacted the way he might have done in years gone by. “One Watcher talking to another,” he drawled. “Warning that you might be a bit on the tender side.” He paused on the word ‘tender’, and Xander could hear the deliberate derision as Spike emphasized the word.

“Don’t you dare go there,” Xander whispered. “Don’t you dare!”

“Or what?” Spike rose from his seat, pushing his cognac glass aside and leaned forward, his long white fingers, stained with yellow, splayed across the rich mahogany of
the dining table. “You going to beat me up like big manly man, you are? Show us what Daddy Harris’ little boy can do?”

Fear of Gabriella’s censure was pushed aside as Xander leapt to his feet and shoved his chair back from the table, his self control in tatters as he focused on his need to show Spike exactly what he could do. But before he could follow through, something streaked through the air from the head of the table and he jerked his head round to see a silver dagger embedded in the wall behind Spike’s head. Spike was standing very still.

“Enough!” Gabriella hissed angrily. She was on her feet, her eyes blazing with anger. “Childish bickering is one thing, but disrespect for the dead is another. This conversation is over for tonight. We will meet for an early breakfast, at which point, Spike, you will give Alexander the book for him to deliver to Mr Giles in London. I believe there is a direct flight out of Marco Polo at around eight tomorrow morning. It only takes a little over an hour to get to London.”

She pushed her chair clear of the table and stalked the length of the long table to where Spike stood. She leaned past him and he stood his ground as she pulled the
dagger out of the wall, but Xander noticed his hands flexing against the polished table top, like they were itching for movement. “Be very careful, Spike,” she said, curtly. “I tolerate you because I have been asked to do so, even though I think you are an abomination. I could very easily make sure the dagger does not miss next time. It won't kill you, but I'm sure I could make it hurt!”

“I’m sure you could, love. Good job we’re both working on the same side now, yeah?” He paused, picked up his cognac and took a long, luxurious sip before smirking her. “Nice move, by the way. I’m kind of curious where you keep the weaponry. Not many places it can go without spoiling the line of that expensive suit of yours.”

Gabriella’s hand twitched on the haft of the blade and Xander glanced from one to the other, trying to decide if he should intervene or keep out of things. After Spike’s snide crack about Rosanna, he was tempted to lock them in a room together and let Gabriella do her worst, but he took a breath and remembered his promise to Giles to play nice, whatever the provocation.

Easing his way to the end of the table, he reached over and took the glass out of Spike’s hand, deciding that there was no way he was going to attempt to part
Gabriella from her knife. He half expected Spike to argue, but there was only a momentary resistance before he let go and Xander set the heavy crystal glass safety back on the table, out of reach, before Spike could use it to annoy Gabriella even more. “Well, that was exciting,” Xander said, trying to defuse the tension before anyone actually got hurt. “I’m not usually one to get in the middle of a good fight, but even though I can’t believe I’m saying this, for once I agree with Spike. He’s an insensitive prick and I wouldn’t mourn his pile of dust if he was killed by a bad guy, but we are all sort of working on the same side. There are enough nasties that would laugh themselves silly at us being at each other’s throats, without making their job any easier for them.” He paused then looked directly at Spike. “Spike, you can say anything you like about me and I’ll roll with the punches. But if you make one more disrespectful mention of Rosanna, I’ll introduce you to Melina. I can guarantee that it won’t be pretty.”

Spike curled his lip in a way that gnawed at Xander’s self control and made him want to pick up the cognac glass and throw it at Spike, but he counted to five in his head and stared back until the annoying vampire chuckled, low in the back of his throat. “Had you going, didn’t I, even if you don’t bark on command anymore.” Xander ground
his teeth, itching to say something, but he waited, knowing from bitter experience that there was probably more to come. “Think I’ll go out for a while. See if something needs killing. Something nasty that is. What with me being one of the good guys now.” He looked Xander up and down and chuckled again before he turned and walked out of the dining room, heading for the hallway and the front door.

Xander risked a glance at Gabriella, but her face was impassive, and after a fleeting internal argument he sighed and followed in Spike’s wake, out through the lounge and into the hallway. Spike was shrugging on his duster while Annunciata looked on from the doorway down to the kitchens at the other end of the richly decorated hall. It was an unassuming door, mostly hidden by the dark wood paneling and the carpenter in Xander acknowledged inwardly how architecture could reflect the function of the people who used it. Discreet, that was the word that came to mind when he looked at the door, and the servants who used it now, and in the centuries before, understood that discretion. He pulled himself out of his thoughts and caught Annunciata’s eye, but she just shook her head and they watched as Spike swished out of the front door without bothering to shut it.
“Well that was fun,” Xander observed and Annunciata smothered a laugh.

“Your definition of both fun and excitement leave something to be desired, Alexander.”

Xander jumped when Gabriella appeared in front of him. He cursed himself that he’d been so focused on Spike’s grand exit and his woolgathering that he hadn’t heard Gabriella come up on his blind side. It was an amateur mistake and he could tell from the slight smile on her face that she knew it and had taken full advantage. “I shall telephone Mr Giles and tell him to expect you sometime tomorrow morning. I think it would be best for all concerned if you took the book back to London as soon as possible. I shall see you first thing in the morning before you go.” It was more of a command than a request, so Xander simply nodded and watched her as she turned on her extremely expensive heel and made her way up the stairs. The dagger was nowhere to be seen and he realised that Spike had a point. He had no idea where she kept it, but he valued his balls far too much to ask.

After he heard the echo of a door shutting somewhere
on the floor above, he turned back to Annunciata and forced a grin. “She loves me really, you know. She’s just fighting her feelings.”

Annunciata laughed and shook her head. “Of course, how could it be otherwise? And the same obviously goes for the vampire, the way the two of you carry on.” At the look on Xander’s face, she laughed again. “Don’t let him upset you. He has a good soul, despite what he would have you believe. It is just a little young for the rest of him.”

“Yeah, I know. But I can’t help it. Every time I think I’m all windswept and mature, I have a run in with blondie and suddenly I’m acting like a ten year old, taking sulky potshots at the cool kids.”

“I think there is a ten year old boy inside every man,” she said with a wry smile. “I am sure that when Ilario is your age, I will still think of him as he is now and he will still be trying to convince his mother that he doesn’t need a haircut.”

Xander started to chuckle, but stopped abruptly at an urgent shout from outside “Harris, get your fat arse out here. Pronto!”
He ran to the still open door and almost collided with Spike tearing up the steps. “What’s wrong?”


Spike jerked his head to the right and peering into the dark, Xander vaguely made out a possibly person-sized shape lying on the dimly lit stone walkway next to the canal about 150 yards away. He glanced back at Annunciata, who was standing just inside the door, her hands twisting in her apron. Her expression was concerned but not panicked and Xander was reminded that she’d served the Council in her own way for years. “What can I do?” she asked. “Should I get Gabriella?”

Xander shook his head. “No, Spike and I can deal. Can you get some kind of covering?” he asked, realizing she needed to do something. “A blanket, or something like that?” He turned back, but Spike was already striding back along the canal bank towards the body, leaving Xander no choice but to leave the dubious safety of the house and follow, his heart pounding at the thought of another death, so soon after the last.

The body lay sprawled on its back across the walkway. As
Xander grew closer, he realised that the ‘it’ was a she. Her legs were spread obscenely wide and her dark blue skirt was pulled up around her hip, revealing black, cotton knickers. One shoe hung halfway off her left foot and the other, heel broken off, was abandoned at the side of the canal. He had the strangest impulse to pick up the shoe and put it back on her foot, like that would somehow make a difference. He clenched his fist to stop himself following through on the thought and carried on with the ghoulish inventory. Her yellow blouse was torn at the shoulders, as if the attacker couldn’t wait to fiddle with buttons and studs. One side hung down revealing an off-white bra that looked like it could do with a wash. The shredded yellow edge of a capped sleeve on the blouse contrasted with the vivid scratches where iron hard hands had gripped and grasped and shaken her body. But it wasn’t the scratches that turned Xander’s stomach. It was the gaping neck wound and the blank look in her eyes that caused him to turn towards the canal and empty his stomach for the second time in days.

He could hear Spike cursing softly and when he forced himself to turn back, he saw Annunciata scurrying towards them, a blanket in her hand. Xander dragged the back of his wrist across his mouth and glanced around warily, peering into the gloom in case the attacker was
watching. But the dim light of the streetlamps cast crazy shadows on the dark water of the canal and if anyone was still near, he knew they wouldn’t be visible in the dark. He pulled his attention back to Spike, standing guard over the body and to Annunciata as she knelt down, clutching a blanket, intent on giving the dead woman some dignity. But as he watched, she paused and suddenly the blanket tumbled to the ground as she brought a shaking hand up to her mouth. “Madre di Dio,” she whispered and crossed herself.

She looked up at them both, tears on her face, but her expression fierce. “Take her into the house. We need to get things cleared up before someone comes. Go in through the courtyard.” She pointed just behind her to a wooden double gate that had once been painted a rich forest green, but now the paint was peeling and faded, a victim of the unforgiving climate of the lagoon. The old gate was topped with elegant and dangerous iron spikes that looked like an addition of more recent years and a random part of Xander’s mind wondered if Spike would appreciate the craftsmanship or whether he would just see a weapon in the ornamentation on the gate. Spike looked questioningly at Xander who could only shrug his shoulders at Annunciata’s instructions as he knelt down, intent on lifting the body away from the killing site and
out of the cool and dangerous dark. It was only then that he heard Annunciata whisper pleadingly. “Don’t let him see. Please don’t let him see.”

Spike crouched down next to her and asked the question Xander was too afraid to ask. “Don’t let who see, love?”

“Ilario,” she whispered. “Please don't let Ilario see her. She is his mother, Elena. She was coming to collect him after supper. She knew where he was. It’s just a game he plays – pretending to play truant. But he is really a good boy. Elena lets him play at being naughty, knowing he is safe here. She was coming to take him home.” She looked up at Xander and reached for his hand. “She was my sister.”

Part Five

The following day was spent in a cycle of silence and tears, interspersed with prayers. Annunciata insisted on
tending to her sister’s body, personally, bathing it gently and doing her best to stitch up the messy wound in Elena’s neck. Xander was surprised at the way Gabriella deferred to her, fetching and carrying as directed. In death, he reflected, everyone really is equal, and even though it wasn’t the first time he’d had the thought, seeing the elegant Watcher defer to the older woman somehow made it seem startling and new.

For the most part, Xander and Spike kept out of the way; close enough to hear a call from the top of the stairs, if required, but far enough away to allow the women of the house to carry out the rituals for the dead, just as women have done for centuries. Mid morning, a priest affiliated to the Council arrived and Xander watched from the shadow cast by the half open library door as Gabriella, dressed in black, escorted him across the hall. Annunciata followed, her fingers threaded through Illario’s small hand. The boy stood upright, his shoulders squared, but in the glow of one of the small Tiffany lamps on the hall table, tear tracks were clear on his face. Xander watched the small procession as it made its way slowly up the stairs to the bedroom where Elena was laid out, waiting until their footsteps stopped echoing in the corridor above, before turning away from the hallway and quietly closing the library door.
Spike sat in one of the deep leather armchairs at the far end of the room, staring into the fire, the inevitable cigarette dangling from the fingers of his right hand as it rested on his knee. From a distance, he looked the picture of introspection, but Xander knew that the vampire was hyper aware of every movement and breath of air in the room. He also knew that they had to discuss business, although it seemed so trivial when others were mourning their dead, just a short distance away. He stood by the door wondering how to approach the subject when Spike made the decision for him by standing up, turning his back to the fire, and fixing Xander with a glare.

“It’s all your fault, you know!”

“My fault?” Xander repeated. “My fault that Elena’s dead? Unless I sprouted fangs when I wasn’t looking, I’m not sure how you make that out?”

Spike stalked towards him, circling around behind and Xander had to turn to keep him in sight. “First your girl in Lisbon. Now this. Bit of a coincidence, yeah?”

Xander wanted to protest, but the little voice that hadn’t
wanted to listen to Giles’ comforting words, on the
phone at the railway station, had already been pushing
him to the edge of that particular rabbit hole. But it was
Spike who was casting blame, so more out of habit than
conviction, Xander made a final effort to stop himself
falling over the edge. “God knows I’m grieving for
Rosanna and maybe, just maybe, someone was out to
make a point, either to me, or Melina, or the Council. I
don’t know. But how the hell is Elena my fault? Christ,
look at the work we do. We run the risk of this, every
single day and so does everyone who works for the
Council, from Buffy down to the guy who waters the
roses in the garden of the London house.” He drew
himself up to his full height and glared down at Spike, but
he knew he wasn’t fooling anyone, least of all himself.

“The boy’s mum didn’t work for the Council,” Spike said
quietly.

Xander’s shoulders slumped. “No, she didn’t, you’re
right. And I hate that she died. It’s horrible. It’s more
than horrible. But she was Annunciata’s sister and she
does work for the Council.

Spike shook his head, walked back to the fireplace and
gazed into the flames for a second before turning back
around. “You don’t see it, do you? You really don’t see it.”

Clenching his hands in frustration, Xander glared back. “Don’t see what? I know I’m half blind, but what the hell are you talking about?”

“You go to Lisbon chasing after that bloody Grimoire, piss off a chaos mage, and your girl gets killed. You come here to collect the companion book and Elena gets killed. Ringing any bells yet?”

Xander stared at him, horrified at the implication. “This is about the books? Christ!”

Flicking the end of his cigarette into the fire with a practiced move, Spike stared his boots for a moment and then looked back up at Xander. “Only thing that makes sense, as far as I can think. Don’t like coincidences. Don’t believe in them.

Xander sighed and raked his fingers through his hair. “No, neither do I.”

“So what the hell was the bloody book all about?”
Realising that they were going to have to have a conversation and that he might as well be comfortable before it started, Xander walked to the chair opposite the one Spike had occupied earlier and slumped down before looking up at Spike, still standing by the fire. “I’m not sure,” he admitted tiredly. “Giles said something about a lock and a key. The one in Lisbon was the lock and this one is the key. To be honest, when we talked, I was at the train station and I guess I was still in shock after Rosanna’s death. The station was busy and loud; my head hurt and I wasn’t really listening which was dumb of me, before you say anything. But you know how these assignments work: go find something really shiny, bring it home, get a pat on the head and wait for the next instruction.” He was surprised by the edge of cynicism in his own voice and from the look on Spike’s face, so was he. Xander decided that was something to ponder at another time and ploughed on, “It was something about families – about how magic works on people who are linked. I think Giles wanted to get a hold of both books to see if the way they worked together had implications for the way certain types of magic might affect the baby slayers, now that we have a crèche full of them.

Spike lit another cigarette and Xander noticed that he didn’t even look at his hands as his fingers followed a
dance they had done countless times for over a century. He shoved his Zippo into the back pocket of his jeans and took a long pull on his fag, then pointed at Xander, a trail of smoke following his outstretched finger. “Family,” he said. “Like your girl and her mum. Like Elena and Annunciata and the boy. It’s all about family. Looks like someone out there doesn’t want Rupert getting his big brain around how this mojo works.” Nodding, he pulled the cigarette back to his mouth for another long puff and closed his eyes, obviously enjoying the moment, before opening them again and looking back at Xander. “Right that settles it. You can’t go back on your own carrying the other book. You might as well have a tattoo on your forehead saying ‘I’ve got the mystical doodah you want, please kill me now.’ It’d be like bloody opening day at the sales, knowing the way you attract trouble.”

“Absolutely no way,” Xander protested. “I don’t need you to play nursemaid. I’m a big boy, and I’m quite capable of delivering one little book back to Giles without an escort.”

Spike snorted, his derision clear on his face and in his voice. “It’s not like it’s going to be a picnic for me either. Got plenty of stuff I’d rather be doing, but if you get yourself killed, or kidnapped or ritually sacrificed, I’m
never going to hear the end of it from the Slayer and the Witch, and I could do without the headache. More to the point, if you lose that bloody book, Rupert is going to be well grumpy and he’s got a very nasty way about him when he’s not happy, does our Rupert. You’re not happy, I’m not happy, but tough titty, that’s the way it is.”

Xander thought about continuing to argue, but he knew that Spike had a point, even if he didn’t want to admit it, so he settled for a grumpy sigh. “The thing I don’t understand is, why not just kill me and take the books? Not that I’m objecting to not being killed,” he said, off Spike’s look. “I wasn’t expecting trouble. Well no more than normal. I was careful on the way here, but if someone had wanted to get to me, they could have done.”

Now it was Spike’s turn to sigh, as he replied in the tone of one speaking to a particularly stupid child, “Yes, but you didn’t have the second book then, you berk. And you got the first one teleported, so there wasn’t time to get it then. Besides, I think these killings are a sideshow. Someone stamping their foot because they haven’t been able to get their hands on the goodies. Whoever’s behind them probably hired some vamp muscle to cause a little mayhem and get us running scared. Maybe your chaos
mage, maybe someone else with an interest. They’re trying to get you all wrong footed, I reckon.”

The idea of Rosanna and Elena’s deaths being someone’s petulant gesture, made Xander want to scream. It also made him more determined. “Okay, so we need to get back to London and hand the second book over to Giles.” He paused, rubbing his fingers back and forth across his forehead like he was trying to massage away a headache. “But that means leaving everyone here in the middle of all this shit. I don’t know if I can do that.”

“Someone’s killing because of these books. You stay here, you risk getting someone else killed. Can you deal with that?”

Giving his head a final rub, Xander slumped in his chair and stared into the fire like he was hoping it would give him a solution that didn’t involve making decisions. The fire didn’t help. “No. I don’t want to anyone else to get hurt,” he said softly, looking back up at Spike. “You know that. So I guess I’m checking night flights to London. See if we can get out tonight.”

Spike nodded. “Yeah, we should go sooner, rather than later. The chickies here will understand. They’ve both got
their heads screwed on the right way when it comes to doing what’s necessary. But flying’s not a good idea, it’s too obvious.”

“Then what? Because you know I’m not spending a couple of days in a car with you, doing a road trip across Europe. We’d kill each other before we got to the French border.”

“Which is exactly why I’ve got a much better idea,” Spike said smugly.

“You know I really hate it when you’re smug. I mean I pretty much hate you most of the time, on general principle, but when you’re smug, you really are fucking irritating.”

Spike gave him the finger by way of a response and then fished in the front pocket of his jeans.

“And now you look like your touching yourself up, which is just disturbing. How the hell do you get anything in those pockets, in the first place, never mind get anything out.

Spike grinned as he hauled out a battered leather wallet.
“Prime bit of real estate down there, let me tell you. Anyway, a little pocket diddling can be fun. You can’t tell me you didn’t indulge now and then, back when you were wearing all those baggy trousers in high school.”

“I did not,” Xander protested and then stopped when he noticed the gleeful look on the annoying vampire’s face. “Okay, that’s it. I’m not going to have this discussion.” He nearly said ‘sucked into this discussion’ but thought better of it at the last moment. “So what’s with the wallet? Does it turn into a magic carpet, or something, when you say abracadabra?”

“Suit yourself,” Spike replied. “You’re the one that started with the comments about touching. As for this little beauty…” He opened the wallet with a flourish. “It’s not a magic carpet, but…” Sliding an innocuous piece of plastic from its casing he waved it under Xander’s nose. “I think you could say a Gold Am Ex is the next best thing, and you don’t even have to rub a bloody lamp to make it work.

Xander stared at it, reading the name on the card. “William Baskerville. Who the hell is William Baskerville?” He narrowed his eyes and looked at Spike in suspicion, as a theory began to form. “Oh hell, you
haven’t been preying on gullible drunk tourists again, have you?” It was bad enough when you found that drunk Spaniard in Edinburgh, stole his wallet and then tried to tell Giles you only did it out of a sense of civic duty.”

“Yeah, good times. Got to love a pissed up tourist. It was his own fault, for trying to pub crawl from one end of the Rose Street to the other. That’s just asking for trouble. Pillock should have stayed in Milne’s Bar. Now there’s a pub with some atmosphere. Brilliant place back in the ‘50’s.”

“Okay, can we stop right there before we completely enter the twilight zone and get back to my question. Who the hell is William Baskerville?”

“You’re looking at him, you moron,” Spike replied, sketching a small, mocking bow.

“You!” Xander exclaimed. “But... How the frilly hell did you manage to get a Gold Card? More to the point, why the hell haven’t I got one?”

Spike just grinned. “Andrew. I did try to wangle a Platinum Card, but the little sod wouldn’t fall for it, not
even when I explained that Platinum came before Gold on the periodic table, so it would be more economical.”

“Andrew!” Xander said, incredulously. “Okay, I’m not even going to get into the whole surreal scenario of you discussing junior chemistry with him, because it’s just going to give me even more of a headache. But, the little bastard... Just when I was beginning to think he was improving.” He paused for a second, nursing his resentment, when another thought struck him. “So what exactly have you got on the little shit that you managed to wangle that out of him? It took me a ton of wheedling just to get him to authorise an upgrade from coach, the last time I flew back from Cape Town with a galloping case of the squirts.”

“Well, I could have lived without that image. Bloody humans and their revolting habits.”

Spike actually sounded disgusted and Xander had to stifle a laugh at the thought that the vampire had a squeamish side, but he decided to keep that that thought to himself, at least for now, and focus on the matter at hand. “Don’t change the subject, Spike,” he said.

“Oh fuck it! I did a little bit of pimping for him. He was
after that little blonde who works behind the bar at the Stag’s Head. You know the one, all tight trousers and tighter little arse. I introduced the two of them, greased the wheels of conversation for a while, and after a few drinks I buggered off and left them to grease themselves, if you get the picture. Little shite owed me big time and this little bit of bright and shiny was his way of saying thank you.”

“You know, hearing Andrew and grease in the same sentence is something I could have lived without.” Xander shuddered to illustrate his point. “But at least it’s an explanation I believe. Although a Gold Card for one date seems a bit grateful, even for Andrew.”

Spike grinned. “Well, after the blonde at the Stag’s Head, there was the redhead at the Rose and Crown and the bloke with the number one cut at that biker bar down near Smithfield Market. I think he’s got an open invitation with that one. Made the little bugger very grateful when it came to helping me with my finances.”

Xander shuddered again. “You know, some things are above and beyond the call of duty... and you setting Andrew up with a leather daddy is a picture I don’t want running around in my head. So, back to the card, what’s
with the name? I get the William bit, but why Baskerville? The only thing I can think of is ‘The Name of the Rose’. Now that was a good movie, creepy, but good.”

Yeah, it wasn’t bad,” Spike acknowledged, “but it was an even better book, though I’m guessing it’d have too many big words in it for you. “ Xander thought about protesting, but decided he couldn’t be bothered and waved Spike to continue, as if somehow he had some control of the conversation. “That bloke Eco nicked the name too, so I just went back to the source material - Conan Doyle’s ‘The Hound of the Baskervilles’. Bloody great book. Bloody genius writer.”

“I’ll take your word for it. So, about the plastic - how’s that going to solve our problems?

“Because, we use the card to buy some train tickets. You had the right idea about taking the train out of Lisbon. Folk are all about instant gratification these days. They’ve got no time to really experience travel, the way we did in the old days.”

Xander found himself nodding, surprised to find Spike voicing his own thoughts. “Okay, I get your point, and I
do find it terrifying that you agree I did something right. But by the time we hop, skip and jump from train to train across half of Europe, days will have gone past.”

“Bloody ignorant git.” Spike’s disgusted tone was back and somehow, Xander was strangely comforted by the return of the insults. It was like being on solid ground after a false step onto quicksand. “We’ll get one train, do the journey in style, ramp up enough charges on the card to give Andrew a minor heart attack and have a bit of a travel experience all at the same time. It’s bloody perfect.”

Xander stared at him. “Oh god, you’re talking about the Orient Express, aren’t you? Haven’t you seen the movie?”

Spike lit another cigarette and smiled.

Part Six
“You know I never realised train travel could be this complicated,” Xander bitched as he raised his arm and let the tailor take yet another measurement. “When I did the trip from Lisbon to Madrid, I just bought a ticket, piled onto the train with everyone else, snoozed, gawped at the scenery and tried not to trip over people’s feet when I went to the head. Okay, it wasn’t glamorous, but it had its moments and the one damn thing it definitely wasn’t, was complicated.”

“Will you stop your whining!” Spike was standing by the door of the fitting room looking like butter wouldn’t melt, even though he’d just gone through the same ordeal himself. “There’s a dress code on the train. Deal with it. And while you’re at it, thank Gabriella for pointing us in the right direction to get sorted. Even you can’t fuck up one of Armani’s finest, even if it is just a hire.”

Xander bit his tongue when he noticed Gabriella exchange a glance with the tailor who prudently hadn't uttered a word through the whole exchange. “These may be hired,” Gabriella said, with just the right note of condescension, “but Andrei’s family has been doing this kind of specialised work for a very long time. He will make the necessary alterations, that will go a long way to
making the pair of you look respectable, or as much as that is possible. When you get to London, simply send them back to me and I will return them here.”

“Thank you Gabriella. You know we really do appreciate it and we promise to be on our best behavior.”

She rolled her eyes at the fake sincerity oozing from Spike. “Why does that not reassure me in the least. If I wasn’t needed here after the events of the last days, I would come with you and keep you both in line. But I’m trusting that, given the circumstances, you will do nothing that will endanger your cargo or anyone else.”

Xander noticed that she hadn’t mentioned not getting themselves in danger, but discretion being the better part of not getting your head on a plate, he decided to keep that thought to himself.

The tailor finished his final measurement with a flourish and bowed gravely in Gabriella’s direction. “Give me two hours and I will have them ready,” he said. I will have them delivered directly to Santa Lucia as I know time is a factor. Look for my son Nicholas at the platform gate. I trust him to be discreet.” Gabriella nodded and waved her hand in a gesture that probably meant that discretion
was a given in their relationship and the old man bowed again. Considering it was only 7.30 in the morning and they’d got the man out of bed, Xander thought it was little early for so much deference, but then he didn’t have to live full time in the same city as Gabriella, so he decided Andrei probably knew what he was doing.

Andrei was true to his word. Two hours later found them collecting two garment bags from a young man that Xander concluded must be Nicholas. Gabriella thanked him while Spike skulked in any patch of shadow he could find. Luckily it was raining gently, so there was justification for Xander to carry the golf umbrella which currently kept them dry and would give Spike enough shelter to get them along to the platform and onto the train.

While the cabin steward was describing the amenities on the train, Xander realised that the poor man was doing his well trained best to suppress what threatened to be a quizzical expression. Xander knew that, even on a train famous for carrying colourful characters, there could be lots of reasons for the almost-expression – between his eye patch and and Spike’s hair, they weren’t exactly a pair of average looking tourists. Then there was the fact that Spike had been vehemently opposed to
surrendering one of his bags to the baggage car despite there being a limit to the size of bag passengers could take into the cabin. The fact that the bag in question was stuffed with weapons wasn’t exactly something that Xander could explain, so he settled for saying the bag had sentimental value, while Spike just stood there and muttered under his breath in Fyarl and Gabriella watched the scene with a look of distaste clear on her face. Yep, either reason would merit a strange look, but Xander suspected it was probably the way Spike had dived to the window when he’d first entered the cabin, pushing past the steward and yanking down the blind in one blur of moment. It was still drizzling, with no sign of the sun outside, but he’d obviously just acted on instinct and the price was a suppressed quizzical look. Xander was still searching for a plausible explanation for Spike’s eccentric behavior when the steward asked if they would like to order afternoon tea and he grabbed the question like a lifeline and asked for coffee as well, if it wouldn’t be too much of a bother. The steward replied grandly that nothing was too much bother on the Orient Express and Xander just smiled his thanks and wondered how far Spike would test that declaration before they got thrown off the train.

Once the steward had left them to their own devices,
Xander’s first thought was that the cabin was smaller than he expected. Even so, there was definitely more space than he was used to when he travelled by train, but the single banquette was immediately occupied by one lounging vampire, doing his best to hog the entire space. Xander's second thought was that there was a small, pink lamp on the side table by the window – a pink lamp with tassels around the bottom of the shade. The juxtaposition of Spike and the frou frou lamp threatened to make him dissolve into a fit of helpless giggles, which probably wouldn’t go down well. His third thought, and the one that stayed with him the longest, was how beautiful the cabin was, especially the wood. It glowed in the soft lamplight, and he spent minutes tracing his fingers over the exquisite marquetry on the paneling and on the rounded doors which opened onto a vanity unit.

This neat little animation of a cabin on the Orient Express shows how the configuration changes at night and was found here: http://www.orient-express.com/web/vsoe/double_cabin.jsp
“Right then, now that you’ve done gawping, maybe we
can work out what our next move is going to be.”

Xander turned reluctantly away from the woodwork and looked questioningly at Spike. “Okay, I’m game. The way I see it, we stay in here this afternoon, since you can’t exactly move about without getting toasty.” He gestured to the blind to underline his statement. “Then we have dinner - since we’ve got these monkey suits, we might as well use them. Come back, go to sleep, get up in the morning, do a bit more hiding out, cross the Channel, get off in London, tomorrow, in time for dinner, and give Giles the book.” He paused and looked at Spike quizzically. “So am I missing something?”

From the poisonous look Spike shot his way, he thought the first thing he’d probably be missing was his liver, or possibly his spleen, depending on what Spike thought was more fun. ‘Okay, I’m sorry, I was being frivolous. What have I missed?”

There was silence for a minute or so, while Spike peered cautiously out of the window from under the slightly raised blind. When he turned round he glared at Xander again and then sighed. “Okay, you pretty much covered everything, but you didn’t need to sound so bloody snarky about it. I was making conversation. We’re going
to be shut up in this overpriced chocolate box for a while, so I thought we might as well be civil, like Gabriella said.”

“You thought telling me to stop gawping was a nice segue into civilised conversation,’ Xander replied incredulously. “And, more to the point, after all your nasty comments about Rosanna and Elena being my fault, I’m supposed to just turn the other cheek.”

“It’s what you do, ain’t it? You do your thing and I do mine.”

“And in this case, ‘your thing’ is twisting the knife in whatever wound you can find.”

Spike inspected his nails for about 10 seconds, picking distractedly at one peeling edge of varnish, before looking back up at Xander. “Oh fuck it. You try being under the same roof as Gabriella for more than a couple of days and you’d be looking for somewhere to put the boot in, too. Damn sure I wasn’t going to do it with her.”

“So you got at me because you couldn’t get at Gabriella?” Xander tried to keep his tone reasonable as he waded through that bit of Spike logic.
“Well, when you put it like that,” Spike replied sulkily.

“Okay, we’re slipping into another one of those twilight zone conversations. So let’s stop right there, agree that Gabriella is a scary lady and I’ll accept your complete non-apology while we work out how we’re going to have this civilised conversation you’re intent on having.

“Yeah, well, maybe we just need a bit of practice. Usually we just spit at each other and if we do that, there really will be a bloody murder on the Orient Express, but it won’t take Hercule, buggering, Poirot to work out whodunit. We’re going to have to at least act like we get along when we go for some nosh later, so I thought we could at least try to have a normal conversation in the meantime."

“Alright,” Xander said slowly. “God knows we’ve done weirder things in the name of the Council, so being nice to each other should be easy, right?”

“Piece of cake”

They stared at the each other for a minute and then Xander crossed the cabin and sat down on the banquette next to Spike. “So,” he said, “what shall we talk about?”
Spike opened his mouth to reply and then shut it again and started to fiddle with the sash cord of the window blind. Xander watched curiously; he didn’t think he’d ever seen the vampire lost for words and he realised that if this was going to work, he was going to have to start the ball rolling.

“Did you know I’ve been in sixteen different countries since Sunnydale imploded.” Spike dropped the cord and looked at him in surprise. “It’s kind of funny that, up until then, I’d never been outside of California, even though I always wanted to travel. But it took a giant sinkhole to make me actually get a passport.”

“Sometimes it takes a kick in the arse to make us get up and do stuff, instead of just talking or dreaming about it.”

“I guess so.”

“So where have you been. It's not like I’ve been keeping tabs on that kind of thing. Had my own stuff going on.”

“Yeah, we’ve all been off doing our own stuff, which has been kind of cool. I know I miss Wills, and Buffy, and Dawn, and even Giles, but they’re doing their own thing
too. And there’s something nice about just being out there and doing my own thing.”

“Not having anyone tell you what to do.”

“Exactly. I know Giles does tell me what to do, in as far as he needs this or that collecting, or can I go and talk to so and so. But apart from that, it’s up to me. I decide how I’m going to get from place to place, what route to take and stuff like that, depending on what the deadline is.” He stretched his legs out in front of him and settled back into the seat, staring up at the ceiling. “I started watching the backpackers at the train stations, doing their gap year, or whatever, and it appealed to me. So I bought a rucksack…” Spike snorted and Xander pointedly refused to look round. “Yeah, I know you think the rucksack is stupid, but it helps me fit in. No one looks twice at me. They don’t see the eye patch and wonder what the weird guy is up to. I’m just another anonymous slacker, bumming round Europe and bits of Africa.” He paused, waiting to see if Spike would rise to the ‘anonymous slacker’ comment, but the vampire seemed to be at least trying to take the whole being civilised thing seriously, so Xander decided to take the silence at face value. “I bought a rail card for getting around Europe. It’s a Youth Rail Card, valid for anyone under 26, so I scrape in by the
skin of my teeth. I thought it was funny at first, after all the shit we’ve seen, that technically I’m still a ‘youth’. Sometimes I don’t feel very youthful, but I’ve been all over with that card – Italy, France, Spain, Greece. Man I loved Greece – all those little islands and all that history. All things being equal, I could see myself buying a little place on one of the smaller islands and just drifting.”

“You’d get bored, after a while. You’d get itchy and wonder what was going on and where the nasties were. Then you’d want to help.”

“I know,” Xander rolled his head slightly until he could see Spike. “It’s a nice fantasy, though.”

“Yeah.”

“So what about you?”

“What about me?”

“What have you been up to?”

“More or less the same, apart from the whole travelling for the experience thing. Got that under my belt a long time ago.”
“Has it changed much?” Spike looked curious at the question. “I mean, do you see things differently now, than when you used to travel before.”

“The small stuff has changed. Hotels change hands, shops and markets come and go. You can get from place to place in hours, when it used to take days, sometimes. Those things have changed. But the big stuff, not so much. Me and Dru travelled all over and the underbelly doesn’t really change, it just gets dressed up in different clothes. The café in Istanbul where we smoked hash won’t be there anymore, but there will be another one, just like it, around the corner”

“You make it sound like you’re really jaded; so why keep travelling? What’s the point?”

“I’m not jaded, I’m just old. Anyway, what’s the alternative? Stay in London and braid the slayers’ hair? Just because I’ve seen a lot of things, doesn’t mean there’s not more to see. Even the stuff that hasn’t changed is worth experiencing again. That history you’re talking about in Greece, the ruins of temples and the feeling that you could be standing right where a myth or legend actually started, that’s something worth
revisiting.

“Do you miss them?”

“Who?”

“Dru, Angel. I told you I missed the gang sometimes when I’m off somewhere and it seems like a long time since I’ve been home. I just wondered, now you’re travelling on your own, whether you missed them?”

“Can’t live in the past. Not even in Greece. We had our time and that time’s in the past. Next time I smoke some hash in Istanbul, whether I’m on my own or with someone else, it’ll be a new experience and that’s the thing that makes it all memorable.”

There was a knock on the door and Xander stood to let the steward in. He was carrying a tray laden with tea and coffeepots, sandwiches and small fancy cakes which he set down carefully on the small, side table under the window. “Tea and coffee as requested, gents. If you need anything else, please just ring the bell.”

“It looks great, thank you.”
“You’re welcome. Have a pleasant afternoon, and I’ll be back to turn down your beds, this evening, while you’re at dinner.”

Xander waited until the steward had left before turning to Spike. “Wow, service! Didn’t happen like that at the Espresso Pump.”

“Yeah, well, a couple of high school dropouts manning the pumps, what do you expect? This is different. They know what they’re doing. Proper tea, with lemon, sandwiches with the crusts cut off and scones with real jam.

“Don’t you mean scones,” replied Xander, pronouncing the word ‘scowns’.

“No, I bloody well don’t. It’s scone , with an ‘aw’ like in ‘porn’, not an ‘owe’ like in ‘drone’ and before you say anything else, this is jam, not jelly. Bloody ignorant yanks, wouldn’t know a bit of class if it came and bit you on the arse.”

Xander snorted, very pointedly ignored the teapot and poured himself some coffee. “I knew it was too good to last.”
“What,” mumbled Spike from behind a mouthful of sandwich.

“Us, being civil to each other.”

Spike swallowed the last bite of his sandwich, took a sip of his tea and grinned. “See that’s the thing you don’t get. All this civilisation, it’s just a veneer. Afternoon tea is like Sunday lunch – it’s all respectable on the surface, but it’s when the best family bloodbaths take place - just with words instead of corpses.” He took a sip of his tea, before smiling like he’d just remembered something particularly nice. “Although, once I was turned, there were plenty of corpses too.”

“And isn’t that a lovely thought to take us through the rest of the afternoon.” Xander took a fortifying gulp of his coffee, bypassed the sandwiches and took a huge bit of a jam and cream laden scone. ‘Scown’ he thought to himself, and grinned.

**Part Seven**

Xander glared at his reflection in the small mirror above the vanity unit, as he tried to tie his tie for what seemed like the hundredth time. “You know that saying, ‘that
practice makes perfect’? Well, in this case, all it makes is a crumpled mess of black cloth.” He turned and waved the offending bit of material in Spike’s general direction. “I don’t see why Gabriella wouldn’t let us just get made up ones. It would be easier.”

“Git. You really have got no class, have you?”

“Oh yeah, and you’re all Mr Sophisticated.”

“Well, I can tie a sodding tie with my bloody eyes closed.”

“Sophisticated and talented. Just as well, considering you can’t actually see yourself in the mirror.”

Spike sighed and grabbed the tie out of Xander’s hand. “Give it here. Now stand still, shut up for once in your life and let me do this.”

Xander opened his mouth to reply, just for the hell of it, and shut it again when Spike draped the tie around his neck and started to manipulate the fabric. He squinted downwards to watch nimble, white fingers twist and turn and, after a moment, withdraw. He continued to squint before realizing that looking in the mirror was probably a
better way to assess the results. He was right and the mirror didn’t lie. There was one, perfectly tied tie.

He turned back and grinned at Spike. “Okay, that was kind of surreal. Last time someone did that, it was Willow for Homecoming…” He stopped, remembering how that had ended. “And I think it’s time for a change of subject. So now that we look like models for ‘Rent-a-Tux’, I’m guessing the next move is to check out the action?

“Well I don’t really care what you do, but I need a bloody drink.”

“I know this is the train that’s meant to have everything, but I’m guessing they probably don’t have a cheeky little O Pos on tap.”

“I doubt it.” Spike paused for a moment, obviously considering the question. “Although, maybe if I’d thought to phone ahead... It’s amazing what money can buy.” With a flourish Spike shot his cuffs until the edge of silver cufflinks winked in the lamplight; he inspected the effect carefully before looking back up at Xander. “Right then, let’s go and see how the other half live.”

“I know how the other half live – in blissful ignorance,”
Xander muttered, under his breath, as he followed Spike out of the cabin.

Spike paused on the threshold of the bar carriage and Xander stopped, abruptly, so he didn’t crash into Spike’s back. Several heads turned to look at the newcomers and Xander wondered how incongruous they looked. Spike, small, compact, and as lithe as a very smug cat, could carry off the tux with panache. Xander had to admit that, although he’d never say it out loud. He knew that he had more confidence that when he was younger, but he was under no illusions about how much he didn’t belong, and the urge to make a joke about a vampire and a one-eyed ex-carpenter walking into a bar, was almost irresistible. He bit his tongue and told his inner standup comic to behave.

After a micro second, the interest in their arrival waned and Xander whispered, “you know there’s a piano in the bar? A piano, in a bar, on a train, and it’s got another one of those little lamps on it. That’s just ludicrous.”

“Not just any piano. That’s a Baby Grand.”

“Of course it is. Silly of me not to have known that! Now I’m just waiting for Dooley Wilson to turn up.”
“Did you know he couldn’t actually play the piano? He was a drummer.”

“Wow, next you’re going to tell me that the tooth fairy isn’t real!”

“Oh, it’s real alright. He extracts your teeth by force when you piss him off.”

“And isn’t that the comforting thought?”

“Less chit chat and lift your knuckles off the floor. It’s time for a drink or six.”

Despite the relative civility of the afternoon, Xander pictured the kind of mayhem the vampire could cause after he’d had his usual bucket of JD and decided that pleading for a graceful retreat might be a good idea. “Spike, do we really have to do this? I’d be quite happy hiding in the carriage for the next thirty six hours. It would be less high profile. “

“Live a little. Probably the only time you’ll get near these heights, so kick back and enjoy it.”
Oh well, Xander thought, it was worth a try. Before he could make another attempt, Spike was gone, making his way through the bar crowd with a touch on the shoulder here and a quiet word there. Realising that letting Spike get out of sight was probably at the top of the list of things that would get lead to getting them thrown off the train, Xander took a breath and started to work his way through the carriage. At least, for once, he knew exactly where Spike was headed.

By the time he got to the bar, Spike was talking to the bar tender like he’d know the man all his life, which, given Spike’s age, was actually possible. The thought distracted him for a heartbeat until he realised Spike was ordering.

“Lagavulin,” Spike said. “You’ve got the 16 year old?”

The bar man nodded respectfully before turning to look at Xander expectantly. Xander knew that he could order a beer, if he wanted to, but that it wasn’t really the right venue. He could also tell Spike that was just itching to order for him, just to illustrate that he was more comfortable in the setting than Xander was. But Xander had done a lot of travelling in the years since he’d left Sunnydale, and while, whenever he and Spike met, he had a tendency to revert to junior high manners, he
actually had experienced some of the finer things of life, when they unexpectedly arose. Knowing how to fit into a bar was definitely a skill for an itinerant Watcher, so he brushed an imaginary piece of fluff off of his lapel and smiled at the waiting bar tender. “I’ll have a Negroni, please.”

Again the man nodded and turned to deal with their order while Spike raised an eyebrow. “Okay, I admit it; that was unexpected.”

Xander grinned, more than a little satisfied that he’d made the right decision. “Just because I play an idiot on TV, doesn’t mean I am one. I’ve been around, Spike. I’m not sixteen anymore. I know I’m not all windswept and interesting, but I’m not a kid, and while this isn’t my comfort zone, I think I can work out the rules.

The bar tender returned with their drinks and set a couple of small plates of canapés in front of them on the bar. Xander watched Spike take an appreciative sip of his malt before scooping a small spoonful of caviar onto a cracker and popping it into his mouth with a flourish.

“I’m never really sure why you eat,” Xander said curiously. “You don’t need to, but you always make a
point of it.”

“That’s easy. I enjoy it. And one of the reasons I’ve been around as long as I have; I blend in.”

“Not with that hair, you don’t,” Xander said with a chuckle.

“It’s a statement. Look around you.” Spike gestured in the direction of the other passengers, dressed to the nines and seated in the double and single banquettes around the carriage. “These folk know all about statements.”

Xander hovered over the canapés, trying to decide if his self-proclaimed ‘adult self’ was ready to try caviar, before settling on the olives on the next plate. He picked up a Kalamata, popped it in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully while he thought about Spike’s words. “So,” he asked, “what kind of statements are being made in here?”

“I thought you were going to ask something difficult! See that old couple down at the end, drinking their champagne cocktails? They’re on the retirement trip of a lifetime, spending money now, instead of leaving it to the
kids. Bet the family waved them off at the station with lots of hugs and smiles, then cursed them to hell and back for spending their inheritance.”

Xander took a sip of his drink, and looked around the carriage. “What about those four over there?” he asked, gesturing towards the four beefy men at the other end of the bar.

“Oil, or possibly gas. Definitely natural resources. On their way up the ladder.”

“How the hell did you get that?”

“It’s just a case of knowing what to look for. Look at their skin, it’s all weather beaten. Their hands are manicured, but still rough around the edges. Tuxes are probably Versace, definitely something that they think spells cash. Yeah, they’re on their way up the greasy pole, or in their case, down the oily pipeline.”

“You’re just making this up, aren’t you?”

It was Spike’s turn to grin. “Your go. Look at those two young things down there. What’s their statement?” He nodded to the table next to the elderly couple they’d
sized up earlier. It was occupied by a young couple who were ignoring everyone else, in favour of holding hands, blushing, giggling occasionally and sipping their drinks nervously. ‘So,’’ Spike said, “fill your boots.”

“You know there are certain weird Britishims that I’ll never get used to and that’s one of them.” He shook his and refocused on the question at hand. ”Those two are either newlyweds on their big honeymoon trip, or possibly eloping, or possibly lovers who are having an illicit affair and are getting all their giggling and handholding in before they get back to London and go back to their not so significant others.”

“Close, but no cigar. If they were having an affair, they wouldn’t be in here, giggling and making cows eyes at each other. They’d be back in the cabin, with room service delivery and a locked door. I’d say newlyweds. Got that 'bloom not yet off the rose' look about them.”

With a satisfied nod that he was right, Spike gestured for the bar tender to hit him again and Xander shrugged his shoulders and thought, what the hell. If he was going to be cooped up with the vampire for the night and the best part of another day, it would probably be easier if he wasn’t entirely sober.
He sipped thoughtfully on his second drink, before placing it carefully back on the polished wood of the bar top. “So all these people are making statements. If they were playing the same game, what would they say about us, do you think?

“They’d look at me and think old money. I don’t give a damn about what any one of them thinks and they know it. Don’t get this kind of confidence when your dosh is still warm from the presses. As for you,” Spike paused, looked Xander up and down and tilted his head to the side. “You clean up, not bad. Got the build to carry off the tux. Got the eye patch working the whole man of mystery look. Got the tan from running around in Africa. Could be a bodyguard. Could be a mercenary talking to a new client. Could be a gun runner, enjoying the fruits of your ill-gotten gains.”

Xander snorted. “So you’re old money and I’m something disreputable in an expensive suit; that’s what you’re trying to say?”

“Not me. You asked me what others might be thinking. Like you said, you’ve been around, these last few years, and although it pains me to admit it, it shows.” Xander
stared at him, lost for words for once in his life and Spike took a sip of his malt, before continuing. “You look like you can handle yourself. That’s what matters here. It’s all about show. It wouldn't matter to them if you were really a ten stone weakling who couldn’t fight his way out of a paper bag. It wouldn't matter that you’ve got that bloody rucksack tucked inside one of Gabriella’s posh suitcases. They don’t know that. With this lot, it’s what they think that matters. Once someone has an image fixed in their mind, of how you are and who you are, it’s almost impossible to make them think differently.”

“Wow, that was almost deep.”

“Yeah, well I don’t intend on making a habit of it once we’re off the train. Come on, you must be starving, from the noises that belly of yours in making. Let’s eat.”

If Xander kept a diary, it would certainly have gone down as one of the weirdest nights of his already weird life. The food was as terrific as he expected, the small amount of wine he allowed himself was very pleasant and the usually annoying vampire was being surprisingly civilised, so the practice in the afternoon hadn’t been in vain. As they ambled back toward their cabin, a thought struck him. “You said that once someone has an image stuck in
their head, it’s almost impossible to shift it. So when you first came to Sunnydale, if you’d been dressed like this, instead of in the docs and the duster, would we have had a different reaction?”

“It’s possible. The clothes wouldn’t have changed the fact that I had two slayers under my belt and was cruising for my third, but the suave look might have thrown her off her game a bit more. It might have thrown you all off your game.” He opened the door to the cabin and walked in. Xander followed and Spike stepped to the side and closed the door quickly before shoving Xander hard against the wall. “But unlike those gits in the bar, you know that it’s just window dressing. I was a killer then and I’m a killer now. Might be working for the same side, more or less, these days, but the soul is just a leash. Don’t ever make the mistake of thinking that I’m tame.”

“Jesus, Spike, warn a guy if you’re going to rough up the tux. We have to post these back to Venice when we get to London, or Gabriella will not be happy. And while I completely admit that you’re intimidating and scary, to be honest, pissing Gabriella off worries me more.

“Coward.”
“I just choose battles I’ve got some chance of surviving.”

“You’re like a cockroach, Harris. You’ll always survive.”

“And with that little ego boost, I think it’s time for bed.”

While they’d been at dinner, the steward had been in and prepared the cabin for the night. The seating had gone and two bunk beds had miraculously appeared. The glow from the small table lamp made the rich wood gleam. Spike took in the scene with a satisfied smile on his face and then put his hand on the small ladder propped up against the bunks. “Right then, I’m on top.”

Xander decided he wasn’t going to deign that with an answer and got ready for bed.

The next day passed quickly, in a flurry of breakfast, mid morning coffee, lunch, afternoon tea and forays into civilised conversation with varying degrees of success. There were border crossings and passport checks, and after the tension of the previous days, Xander was looking forward to getting to London, handing the damn book to Giles and having a few well deserved days off. If nothing else, he needed some time to grieve for Rosanna and Elena, in peace, away from the concerned looks and
hugs he knew would be waiting when he got into London.

It was getting dark when they finally slid into Victoria. Xander rubbed the condensation from the inside of the window and saw that unlike the fine rain in Venice, the rain was coming down in sheets. “Okay, welcome to England. It’s raining, there’s a surprise.”

“And of course it never bloody rains in California.”

“Not according to the song anyway.”

“Pillock”

“And normal service is resumed. I’m kind of relieved. I was beginning to think the pod people had got you.” Before Spike could reply, Xander hurried on. “So Gabriella said Giles was going to send a couple of the baby slayers to meet us, which sounds like a plan.”

The train came to a smooth stop and the doors opened, interrupting their conversation. Xander shrugged on his jacket and grabbed his bag before stepping down onto the damp platform. Spike followed, but from the mulish expression on his face, Xander knew that Spike was less
than happy.

“Don’t need babysitting by a couple of chits,” Spike muttered. “I can take on anything that’s after the goodies, can’t I?”

“Spike, I don’t think anyone is casting doubt on your manhood, or vamphood, or whatever. I was thinking more along the lines of getting them to carry these suitcases Gabriella insisted we bring. Why carry them ourselves when we’ve got muscle on call? But first we’ve got to collect the other bags from the baggage car. Hopefully by the time we do that, we’ll have a slayer chain gang waiting to carry the load.”

Spike stared at Xander, a shocked look on his face. “What do you mean we’ve got to collect our bags ourselves? What’s the bloody point of having the Gold card if we don’t get full service? It’s like having a dog and having to bark yourself!”

“Spike, even first class passengers on planes have to collect their own bags at airports. Well, unless you’re someone really, really famous, which by the way, we’re not. Why should it be different here? Gold card, platinum card, hell it probably wouldn’t matter if we had a card
made of moon rock, we’d still have to collect our own bags like everyone else. You’ve been waited on hand and foot for the last couple of days, so stop bitching!”

Xander turned on his heel and walked off down the platform and it took real force of will not to turn and laugh in Spike’s face when he heard the vampire trailing behind, muttering about the decline of manners and the scourge of the self-service culture on the fabric of modern life.

Ten minutes later, after another wrangle with the porter over Spike’s incognito bag of weapons, Xander was ready for home. He fleetingly thought that a Willow express special would be kind of neat right now, even if it always made him feel dizzy and nauseous, but he realised that it would negate the whole point of having been trapped in a train with Spike so they didn’t upset the magical book. Instead he’d settle for the Slayer express back to the house, a hot bath, a cold beer and his own bed.

Pulling himself out of his thoughts, Xander realised from the look on Spike’s face that the grumpiness was heading for warp factor ten.

“So we’ve got the bloody bags, but I don’t see any
souped up Barbies on the platform, so looks like we’re on our own. And not a bloody trolley in sight, either - fucking typical.”

Xander chuckled. “Maybe they’re undercover, the slayers I mean, not the trolleys.” He paused, and stared at Spike in dismay. “I just said ‘trolleys’, oh hell, I’ve been assimilated!” Spike snorted and Xander stuck his tongue out before looking around the station. “The girls are probably waiting in the car. You know what London’s like. The parking around stations is hellish; you leave a car alone for more than two minutes in the wrong area and it’ll get ticketed or towed. Come on supervamp, I guess we’ll have to do without the girl-power muscle and struggle down to the pickup point under our own steam.” Xander shifted his carry on, across his shoulder to even up the weight and looked pointedly at Spike who was glaring at the bags sitting at his feet. “Try not to strain yourself, Spike. I know you’re all delicate, but I’m sure you can manage a couple of bags until we can get the little girls to take them off your hands.” Without waiting for Spike’s reply, Xander grabbed the handle of his pull-along and strode off down the platform. He didn’t look back, but he didn’t need any Hellmouth trained sensitivity to know that one very pissed off vampire was right behind him.
The side entrance onto Hudson’s Place wasn’t too far and there were a few cars and white vans parked against the curb, some of them illegally. Xander paused and looked up and down before spotting the battered Peugeot that Giles had bought for the girls to drive. “Come on,” he said over his shoulder to Spike. “There’s the car and they’re obviously in some Slayer snit about having to come and pick us up in this weather, so I think we’re going to have to do our own toting and lifting a little bit longer.

The rain battered down and by the time Xander drew level with the car he could feel the water running down his neck of his jacket and soaking into his shirt below. The windows were steamed up and despite the miserable weather he looked back at Spike with a grin. "I’m guessing Giles sent us Ginny and Maureen. Dawn told me they were doing a bit of experimenting and it looks like they’ve been getting in a little quality practice time while they waited” He banged on the rear side window to give the girls time to get themselves together before opening the door and sticking his head in, ready to embarrass them, just a little.

The smart comment stuck in his throat and he stood back
up slowly and looked back at Spike who was standing at the back of the car, with an impatient look on his face. “They’re dead. Jesus, Spike. It looks like they’ve been gutted.”

Gabriella’s expensive luggage forgotten in the soggy gutter, Spike stalked forward and crouched down, looking into the car. He leaned forward, running his fingers through the pool of blood on the floor of the car. “Still warm,” he said.

Xander leaned his forehead on the top of the open door, trying to order his thoughts. His hands were splayed across the soaked roof of the car, little rivulets of water pooling in the dams at the base of each finger and he curled his fists and tried to make his brain function. The street wasn’t busy, but he realised that they couldn’t stand and do nothing. The car was parked legally, but he knew that it wouldn’t be long before the railway police investigated why it was still parked once the ticket ran out.

Taking a deep breath, he crouched down again, looking over Spike’s shoulder at the carnage in the car. The smell of blood was overwhelming, but he made himself focus, taking in the two bodies in the back seat. They were
sprawled, one half on top of the other, the wounds in their stomachs glistening and raw in the dim illumination of the inside car light. Red hair was twisted and tangled with black, eyes were thankfully closed, but slack mouths gaped open, accusing, until Xander could almost hear the echo of a silent scream.

“Harris...” Spike’s voice was low and urgent, breaking into his muddled thoughts. “Look at her hand.”

Xander pulled his gaze away from the girls’ faces and followed Spike’s direction. Something white nestled in the palm of one dead hand.

Spike stood up, giving him room, and cautiously, Xander leaned forward and eased the paper free, noticing how thick it felt under his numb fingers. It was folded, sharply creased along one long edge. He glanced back up at Spike, then being careful to keep his hands inside the car and out of the rain, he cautiously opened the paper with one trembling hand.

There was a single capitalised word on the paper, written in green ink and he stared at it uncomprehendingly before looking back at Spike. “What the hell does ‘FOUR’ mean?”
Part Eight

Xander leaned against the book cases lining the long wall in Giles’ office. The wire lattice on the doors to the cabinets dug into his back, but he ignored the sensation, focusing instead on Giles, sitting at his desk, leafing his way cautiously through the books in front of him. Spike slouched against the other wall, twirling an unlit cigarette between his fingers.

“So, Giles, you’ve got both the books that you wanted, some bodies and a cryptic note. Kind of Hellmouth, Agatha Christie style don’t you think?

Giles glanced up at Xander and then back down at the books as he answered. “Thank you, Xander, for that somewhat colourful summation of the situation. I am relieved to have both the books together. They will assist with some important research on the ramifications of the activation spell.”

Xander willed Giles to look back up from the books and pay attention to the people in the room. It didn’t happen. “And the bodies?” he said. “Will they assist in
this important research?” He knew he sounded bitchy, but the idea that the books seemed more important than the deaths bugged the hell out of him.

Marking the page carefully with a leather bookmark before closing the book, Giles sighed and looked up at Xander. “I am as distressed as you are about the deaths. Someone obviously was very unhappy that we have these books and they were prepared to do a lot to make that point. It’s tragic – Rosanna, Elena and the latest victims, our two young slayers. They are all missed and mourned.”

“They have names, Rupert.” Xander glanced across at Spike, surprised at the vampire’s unexpected support.

“Yes, Spike. I know they have names. I should know. I saw them every day, at every meal, after every patrol. They were Virginia, or more commonly, Ginny, and Maureen, to be precise. They were both seventeen. Ginny had just passed her driving test and Maureen dreamed of being a dancer before she was called. They were seeing each other, I believe. It was still very new and they thought they were shocking the adults.” Giles shook his head and turned away from Spike to look at Xander. “You think I’m being cold. I’m sorry. I mourn
them, I really do. So will their families. Willow is arranging for their bodies to be sent home so their families can say goodbye. I’m sorry Xander; I don’t know what else to say.”

“I know.” All of a sudden, Xander felt like the world’s biggest jerk. He recognised the feeling from all the other times it had happened over the years. “It’s me who should be sorry. I feel like these books are cursed. Or maybe it’s me. If they hadn’t come to pick me up at the station…” He trailed off, glancing across at Spike as he remembered Spike’s comments in Venice. Even with Spike’s explanation about him being an easier target than Gabriella, somehow Xander couldn’t help thinking that Spike was right – that it really was all his fault.

Giles broke into his self-recrimination. “Xander, it’s not you. Believe me. It will stop now. The books are here, so whoever it was, has failed. It’s safe. As I have said before, grieve, but don’t blame yourself. It’s time to move on.”

“And the note?”

“Well, that’s bleeding obvious,” Spike said witheringly, flicking his Zippo on and off, but never quite getting to the stage of lighting his fag. “It said ‘FOUR’. There have
been four killings since you went to fetch those bloody things. Rosanna, Elena and now the two slayers. The note shows that they’re all connected.” Xander caught Spike’s eye and then looked away, half embarrassed that he hadn’t immediately realised what the number meant. He knew objectively that if anyone else had found the girls and the note, he would have cut them all sorts of slack for being too shocked by the deaths to make the immediate connection, but somehow he could never be that objective with his own failures. He rubbed the heel of his hand across the bone at the edge of his empty eye socket and looked back up, making himself pay attention to what Spike was saying.

See, Watcher,” Spike pointed the unlit cigarette at Giles. “You’d better be right about it being safe now. You’d better keep those things under lock and key, now you’ve got them. Anyone else gets killed, it’ll be on your head.”

Giles sat back in his chair, his fingers drumming on the leather binding of the book in front of him. “Thank you for that blinding revelation, Spike. I’d never have worked out that the number in the note referred to these deaths, without your valuable insight.” He rubbed his hand slowly over his face and it occurred to Xander that he hadn’t seen Giles look so tired in a long time. “I say again,
I’m sorry if I came across as hard or uncaring. I do appreciate you both for helping to deliver these. I know that it has been difficult to say the least. Rest assured that I will keep the books safe and they will be properly utilized to help the slayers. In the meantime why don’t you take a few days off? Regroup, as it were.”

“I think I’ll check and see if Willow needs help with getting Ginny and Maureen home. Someone should travel with them, to make sure they get to their families safely.”

“Xander, I know you mean well, but playing undertaker won’t bring them back and it won’t assuage your guilt.”

“Then Buffy, or Dawn must need some help with something,” Xander replied stubbornly.

“Dawn is in Devon doing an errand for me at the Coven. She won’t be back until tomorrow. Buffy is out with some of the younger slayers. I suspect she will be back in the early hours, but I’m sure she has things under control. And before you say anything else, Andrew doesn’t need help keeping the household straight.”

“But...”
“No,” Giles said firmly. “Things are well in hand. When I said take a few days off, I meant, do something different. I know you have just arrived back and I don’t want you to think that you’re not welcome, but to be honest if you stay around, you will only brood and find other, new and inventive ways to persuade yourself that this is all your fault.”

“So you don’t want me to brood in your hair?”

“Despite, the colourful and somewhat dubious metaphor, that’s not what I mean. Go do something different that’s not related to the Council or slayers, or the supernatural in general. Please. Just for a day or two. Come back refreshed.”

Xander wanted to protest some more, but the ‘please’ got under his skin and he realised Giles was right. “Okay, I get it. I’ll go be fray-adjacent for a while.” He studied his boots for a second before looking back up at Giles. “You know I can’t believe that less than a week ago I was sitting having a beer with Melina, telling her how relaxed I finally was after Morocco. Then it all went to hell and it feels like months since I was in Lisbon.” He closed his eye, picturing the colourful rooftop patio and the sight of
the lights of the Alfama twinkling below. It was another
time, another place and he knew that despite all the
wishes he could never voice, that there was no going
back. There was only forward. He opened his eye and
smiled wryly when he found Giles watching him. “I guess
I could go down to Oxford. Got an invitation a while ago
from a buddy, but never thought I’d be around to take it
up. Some kind of graduation do. It’s tomorrow night. It
might be interesting to see if the Brits do graduation
without blowing things up.”

Spike pushed himself off the wall and stalked over to
Xander. “So much for you being ‘Mr Independent’,
swanning round Europe doing your own thing. You get
back here and the first time Rupert tells you to jump, you
get right on that. Graduation do?” he asked
incredulously. “Bodies all over the place and you’re going
to a bleeding party?

“It’s an excuse, Spike. Giles is right. I can’t do anything
here. Oxford is as good a place as any to brood without
upsetting anyone, and if there’s free beer, I can get drunk
in peace without getting lectures from any of the girls. I
know Giles won’t lecture about getting drunk, he’d only
tut if I did it on anything less than decent English bitter.”
Xander glanced over at Giles and got a slightly twisted smile before Giles answered. “You know me too well, Xander. Perhaps you’d like to take Spike with you?”

“That would be a big, hell no!”

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The early evening sun was beginning to fade towards twilight when Xander pulled up at the Oxford hotel where the party was being held and there was the beginning of a chill in the air that spoke of the promise of autumn on the horizon. The thought made him shiver as he checked in and glanced around him. Whoever had thought turning an old prison into a hotel would be a wacky idea, had obviously never spent a night in the cells for real. Of course, that was a bit of history that he wasn’t proud of, but it really hadn’t been his fault. Bar fights in Tripoli were almost unavoidable, and it had only been the one night in jail, as a result. And if he hadn’t told the girls about that particular exploit, well it must have been one of those little unimportant things that had slipped his mind.

He hefted his bag, grabbed his keycard off the polished wood reception counter and looked up at the ceiling
several storey’s above. The ground floor was designed as one big atrium, taking advantage of the natural architecture of the old prison, complete with original metal stairways and walkways around the walls. The contrast between the cold metal and the warmth of the wood, the sheen of the glass and richness of the fabric on sofas and throw cushions, jarred his senses and made him scan the shadows and dark corners. The hotel was built on the shell of the prison, but the glamour and glitz was like dressing a corpse in its Sunday best. It looked beautiful in carefully chosen lighting, but it didn’t make it any less of a corpse.

The feeling lasted for the length of time it took to climb the stairs, his boots clattering on the hard metal steps, and find his room on the first floor. He flicked on the main light and a cozy room dressed in peacock blue and jade opened out before him. The warmth of the colours and brightness of the lighting banished his shivers, after a brief moment, and he shook his head at his own fancifulness. After the drive down from London and the events of the previous week, he knew what he needed was a shower and shave, a change of clothes, a beer and a chance to do something normal, just for a little while.

The shades of twilight that had welcomed his arrival to
the hotel had been overtaken by darkness and Xander stood by the bar watching the light from the gibbous moon through the window while he contemplated why normality was highly over-rated. His so-called buddy, who was actually more of an acquaintance, had forgotten to mention it was fancy dress and while not everyone had made the effort, enough had done so to make him feel like an adult in a room full of overgrown, drunk kids. The events of the last few days were still preying on his mind and the image of the two dead slayers lying in the car suddenly made his second pint of Brakspear taste bitter, for all the wrong reasons, and he started to regret having the filo wrapped prawns that had looked so appetizing when he arrived.

He looked around, carefully, trying to spot his host and saw that he was embroiled in a conversation with two Darth Vaders and a very disturbing Princess Leia, who shouldn’t have been allowed anywhere near a metal bikini. Satisfied that he could make it out without being spotted, Xander eyed the remains of his beer, regretfully, and turned to set it down on the bar. It was a good plan, but as he turned he smacked into one of the worst Jack Sparrow’s he’d ever seen and promptly spilled the rest of his pint down the front of the puffy, white shirt.
“Shit!” he exclaimed. “God, I’m so sorry. I didn’t see you and…” Xander trailed off when he realised that the imitation pirate was just staring at him, a look of what could only be described as disbelief on his face.

“You know, you could at least have made an effort,” the pirate said. “Look at this, I’ve got the shirt and the earrings and the breeches and the big boots. I even got a replica flintlock,” he said, waving his hand at the gun stuffed into the sash at his waist. “See, I’ve made an effort.” Xander looked at him, confused, but decided to let him have his little rant, rather than cause a scene. “What makes you think you can just slap on an eye patch and that’s it, end of story. What have you come as – some kind of postmodern, deconstructed Captain Kidd?”

Xander’s life was definitely heading towards the twilight zone again, even without Spike being there, and he decided to bypass discretion and go straight for the retreat as the better part of valour. He took a careful step back and to the side, and then glanced quickly back at the Star Wars party, but they were still deep in conversation. As he turned back to give a final apology, Captain Sparrow’s hand flew up and hauled at Xander’s eye patch, pulling it so that it sat half way up his forehead. Xander quickly pulled it back into place, but
not quickly enough to avoid the look of revulsion and dismay on the face of the would-be pirate. “Shit, man! I’m sorry. I didn’t know it was real. I’m, I’m...” His apologies stuttered to a halt and Xander gave him a pat on the shoulder and hauled out his wallet, pulling out a £10 note.

He pushed it into the pirate’s hand. “Here, don’t worry about it. Sorry about the shirt. Why don’t you have a pint on me?” Without waiting for a reply, he made a bee line for the exit and headed back up to his room.

The encounter in the bar had left him on edge and he knew that despite being tired, he had no chance of getting any sleep for a while. After a moment contemplating his options, he lifted the phone and dialed a number from memory, smiling when he heard a sleepy hello at the other end.

“Hey Dawn, I thought I’d check in. See how you were doing. Check you got back from Devon safely. I didn’t get a chance when I got back, what with all the major badness and Giles ordering me to go and get some R&R.”

“I just assumed that you were too busy making nice with your new buddy Spike.” Oh yeah, thought Xander, Dawn
was still issues girl when it came to Spike.

“Come on, Dawn, don’t be like that. You know that Spike and I are like oil and water. But I have come to the realisation that we both work for the Council in our own unique way, so I have to at least be civil to him.”

She snorted derisively down the phone, but didn’t reply. “Okay, so we’re not civil most of the time,” Xander conceded. "But we’re not actively trying to kill each other, anymore, and I know that you probably don’t see that as progress, but I think I’m growing as a person.”

There was another snort, but it was tinged with a hint of amusement and Xander knew that the ability to read the nuances of random noises down a phone line was testament to just how long he’d been travelling. It was an ability he’d put to good use over the years and at that moment he could tell that she was weakening and decided to press his advantage. “Come on Dawn, I’m in this weird hotel that used to be a prison. I’m sure it’s very chic, and the tourists pay an arm and a leg for the ‘unique experience’, but when it comes down to it, it’s just some paint and paper and a few fancy sofas and throw cushions. Underneath it’s still hard and cold and kind of soulless, you know?”
“Xander, are you okay?” she asked, dropping the attitude, obvious worry colouring her question.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just a bit off balance, I guess. So, are you still speaking to me, even though I went off without checking in? Although it was kind of difficult to check in with you not being there.”

“That is so beside the point, but since you’re phoning now, I promise not to be offended and hold it against you for the rest of your life, how’s that?” She paused and he could almost hear the wheels turning in her head. “Or at least, I will if you promise to bring me back a present. “ She paused again. “And not some cheap tourist tat! Something nice!”

Xander knew that ‘nice’ was a code for ‘expensive' and he grinned to himself as he thought about the delicate hand-blown glass key that he’d picked up in Venice. He hadn’t fully unpacked when he’d arrived back in the London house and he’d forgotten that it was still carefully wrapped in tissue paper at the bottom of his shaving kit. He could tell her about it, but that would spoil the game, so he grinned again and replied. “You drive a hard bargain, you know that? When it comes to
presents, you’re your sister’s sister. Wow, try saying that ten times over when you’re drunk. Not that I’m encouraging you to experiment with alcohol, because, alcohol bad. Just say 'no'. Or is that to drugs? Although alcohol is a kind of drug, so I’m guessing it applies.”

“Xander!” Her tone was half way between exasperated and amused. “Have you been drinking?”

“What? What makes you think that? Because that would be bad. I’ve got a responsibility to be a role model to the next generation. It kind of sucks, you know? I wonder if I could be a model to Deep Space 9 instead?”

He could hear her laughing down the phone and gave himself a mental high five.

“So, aren’t you supposed to be whooping it up at some party?”

“Not so much with the whooping. To be honest, it was pretty lame. I think I’ve forgotten how to have fun, that doesn’t involve medieval weaponry.”

“So you went all the way to Oxford and then left the party early?” she asked, her tone showing just how
ludicrous she thought his behavior was.

“That’s about it. I had two pints, to answer your previous question, because I know damn fine you’ll only ask again. Ate some really questionable canapé type things and snuck out as soon as I could, without being obvious about it. Did I mention it was fancy dress, so that was another good reason not to hang around? Anytime I dress up, stuff happens. Bad stuff. I so didn’t want to turn into Man From Gap. Can you imagine it – Gap Man, saving the world, one set of casual chinos at a time?”

“Batman would be cool, but I agree, Gap Man not so much. And if Gap is your definition of party clothes, then I think I need to take you shopping, when you get back to London.”

“Oh, come on Dawn, I said I’d get you a present. There’s no need to make with the threats.”

“Okay, you’re off the hook, for now, but I’m putting you on notice. So, are you coming straight back to London tomorrow? Not that I’m saying you should. In fact, I think Giles is right, you should stay away for a few days and get your breath back, after all the crap you’ve had recently.”
“Hey, now you’re the one on notice. Mind your language.”

“If you can have a beer, then I can say ‘crap’. It’s what you call a ‘quid pro quo’.”

“Now you’re getting nasty, bringing out the Latin.”

“A good tactician uses any weapon they have at their disposal.”

“Sounds like something Machiavelli would have said.”

“Actually it was Andrew, the last time we played D & D.”

He heard her laughing again and smiled back at the phone. “Yeah, well, that little twerp is going to get his ass kicked, the next time we play.”

“Issues much.”

“Of the gold variety. But before I get completely off track, I am going to stay down here for a couple of days. Take a look round Oxford and some of the surrounding area. It’s really pretty.”
“That’s so great. I’m very jealous. Remember when we worked our way through the box set of all the Inspector Morse DVDs?”

“Oh yeah, high class murder and mayhem is a great distraction when you’re waiting for the baby slayers to come back from creating mayhem of their own. If you believe the series, Oxford is like the murder capital of England – like Detroit, with posher accents and more creatively arranged corpses. I think it’s kind of comforting.”

“And what does that say about our lives?”

“That we’re weird and in serious need of therapy?”

“I think that about sums it up!”

“And on that philosophical note, I think I’ll call it a night. I’m not sure how much longer I can keep awake.”

“That’s the down side of the demon drink.” He could hear the hint of disapproval in her tone and stuck his tongue out at her even though she wasn’t there to see it. “And if you stick your tongue out at me again, I’ll demand two presents instead of one. And I’ll drag you out
shopping.”

“Okay, that’s scary. Have you got a webcam in here, or something?”

“Nope. I just know you far too well. Just you remember that, buster.”

“Okay, okay. Received and understood.”

“Right, now, go get some sleep, Xander. I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

“Bully.”

“Yep. ‘Night Xander. Love you.”

“Love you too. See you in a couple of days. I’ll come bearing gifts. ‘Night Dawn.”

He put down the phone and stared out of the window, thinking of his strange family, who he loved and missed whenever he was travelling, and of the conversation he’d had with Spike, back on the Orient Express, when they were practicing being civil to each other.
But he loved the travelling, so the resolution was to carry them in his head and make the most of every contact, when he had them. He wasn’t sure how long he’d be in London. Giles hadn’t talked about the next assignment, due to everything else that was going on, but he hoped that after his few days away in the country, he’d get some time to kick back, mourn his losses and enjoy being with his friends before the next errand needed to be run. With that thought, he undressed slowly, slid under the covers and contemplated the well-thumbed paperback and the i-pod resting on the nightstand, before deciding he was too tired to read or listen to music. He pulled off his patch and placed it on top of the book, closed his eye and tumbled effortlessly into sleep.

She stood with her back to the window, half in and out of the beam of moonlight. Black hair and porcelain skin contrasted with the scarlet silk of her dress and the gleam of patent leather boots. She raised her arms, like wings, and Xander watched mesmerized as she glided towards him, her feet seeming to hardly touch the floor.

“There you are,” she crooned, lowering her arms and bringing her hands together in front of her as if she was praying. “You see, don’t you, my pet? All wrapped up, like a present. I like presents. Presents are for good girls.
Have I been a good girl? I got you presents too. Did you like them?” She cocked her head as if she expected a reply.

“Drusilla, what do you talking about?” His voice sounded hoarse and scratchy, like he’d been screaming for hours.

“I want my present, silly boy. He wants to be a pirate when he grows up. Won’t that be a joy to see? Yo, Ho, Ho on a dead man’s chest. No heart beating in a dead man’s chest.”

Xander struggled to sit up, but the prayer position of her hands rolled forward through 90 degrees as if she was holding a gun, and he found he couldn’t move. “What did you mean about presents, Drusilla?”

“One and two and three and four and five...aren’t you a lucky boy? Five presents in a row. Like five little maids, but there’s no milking. Blood, that’s mummy’s milk.

“You’ll see the black birds, white birds, such pretty birds. Got to find trinkets and treats for the nest.”

She lowered her hands, bending down like she was going to tell a secret. “There are presents to come, lots and lots
and lots,” she whispered. “Paper and bows and streamers. Ice cream and cake. You’ll get all dressed up in your birthday suit and you’ll get all your presents. Then mummy will get one of her own.

“Hush now, sleep my pet. Sleep now and dream. We’ll have tea and cakes on your birthday.”

Arms outstretched again, she spun in a circle, round and round until Xander grew dizzy. His head felt heavy, like the pillow was too insubstantial to support it and he sank back, his eye drooping as he fell into fitful dreams where he was choking on feathers soaked in blood.

The sunshine stole over the window sill, unhindered by the open curtains. Soft beams of light crept across the thick carpet, crawled up walls and lit dark corners, chasing away the shadows of the night. As the sunlight hit the edge of the pillows, Xander turned onto his back and rubbed his sleep gummed eye with the back on one hand. He blinked at the bright room. What had seemed rich and vibrant the evening before, now seemed garish and over the top. He struggled into a sitting position, rubbing his hand roughly over his face and through his hair.
“Wow,” he mumbled. “That beer must have been stronger than I thought, last night. Note to self, stay off the bitter and stick to the stuff I know I can handle.”

He hauled himself out of bed and padded across to the bathroom, turned on the shower as hot as it would go and stepped in, blessing the gods of mid-range hotels for their plentiful supply of hot water. He let the shower run for five minutes while the fog in his brain was replaced by the fog in the shower cubicle. As his head cleared he mulled over the events of the previous day. The party, with its fancy dress, bad canapés and drunken conversations wasn’t something he wanted to dwell on. He thought instead about his conversation with Dawn. Somehow, in the last year or so, he’d come to talk to her, adult to adult, instead of brother to sister. Sure, it was partly because she was now grown up, but there was something about their relationship which went deeper, on a friendship level, than any other he’d had since he first met Willow. He winced when he realised they had talked for a long time, using the hotel phone. That was a demonstration of how strong the bitter had been, that he hadn’t thought to use his cell phone and now he’d be stuck with a ridiculous phone bill. He remembered deciding he was too tired to read or listen to music, and snuggling down into the warmth of the bed. For once,
the hotel bed had been soft and firm in all the right places, with decent sheets and feather pillows. He’d slept well for the most part, apart from some weird assed dreams.

He closed his eye as he remembered Drusilla whispering in the moonlight and shivered despite the heat of the water pouring down his back. 'Okay,' he reasoned. 'I’ve spent a few days cooped up with Spike. There’s been death and mayhem, which isn’t unusual, and we’ve had some creepy books, so my brain is conjuring up weird shit when I’m asleep. Sometimes I hate my brain.'

He turned off the water, dried off slowly, enjoying the feel of the thick towel against his skin. Hedonism was catching, he decided, thinking back to the way Spike luxuriated in the richness of the surroundings on the Orient Express. Once he was dry, he thought about shaving, but he’d done that the night before, when he arrived at the hotel, so decided that between the stubble and the eye patch, it might be fun to unnerve the locals during breakfast. Spike, he thought, was definitely a bad influence.

Wandering back into the bedroom, he pulled out a pair of faded jeans and a soft sweater from his bag and
dressed quickly. He packed his toiletries carefully, conscious of Dawn’s present still wrapped in tissue paper, nestled at the bottom of the bag, and folded the previous night's, semi-respectable party attire into his pack. His notebook and the half read paperback went on top of his clothes and he pushed down hard to get the zip to shut. Placing the bag on the table by the door, he sat down on the bed to put on his socks and shoes before shrugging on his jacket. He picked up his i-pod, ready to stow it in the small zip pocket on this side of his pack, where it was readily accessible, when he noticed an edge of white paper sticking out from the half open zip. The edge of paper that definitely hadn’t been there before when he’d unpacked.

He stared at it and then cautiously plucked it out of the pocket and laid it carefully on the table. The brief contact gave him a sensation of thickness and richness under his fingers and he swallowed hard as he realised where he’d felt the same thing before. Remembering the moves from every episode of CSI he’d ever spooled through, he picked up a pen from the desk and used it to flip the folded paper open. There was only one word, printed in purple ink. It said ‘Five’.

Grabbing his phone, he punched the speed dial and
drummed his fingers as he waited for a pick up at the other end.

“Giles?”

“Xander, how extraordinary. I was just about to call you. I need you to come back to London as quickly as you can.”

“I’m way ahead of you. There’s been another note.”

“What? Where?”

“In my room, here at the hotel. In my bag to be precise. It wasn’t there last night, but it’s here this morning.”

“What did it say?”

“Just a number, like last time. This time it said ‘Five’.”

“Oh dear.”

“What?”

“There’s a pattern.”

“Well, yeah. First ‘four’ now ‘five’.
“I’m afraid it’s more than that, Xander. You obviously haven’t seen today’s newspaper headlines. There was a murder on the Orient Express and before you say anything, I’m not joking. Stewards found the bodies when they went to clean the cabins ready for the next set of passengers.”

“Oh god.”

“I was concerned this was more fallout from the books, so I pulled a few strings to find out more. My contact will deny ever having passed on information, but I did get one pertinent detail.”

“Don’t tell me, there was a note.”

“Precisely. A note with the number ‘three’ on it.

“That means the killer was on the train with us, at least some of the time.’

“It seems likely, yes. So we have a pattern.”

“Christ, Giles. I’ve got a note with the number ‘five’ on it. That means that there’s probably another body here at
the hotel.” He paused as another even nastier thought struck him. “But the note was left with me, not on a body.”

“Xander, I want you to get out of the hotel, now. That note could mean that you’re the next target.”

A/N If anyone is interested, there is indeed a hotel in Oxford converted from an old prison. It’s the Oxford Malmaison and you can find it here....
http://www.malmaison-oxford.com/

Since I posted I actually found some much better pictures of the hotel via Google images - the corporate site isn't that great. If you're interested, you can click on some of the pictures found here...http://www.google.ca/images?rlz=1T4SNYO_enCA292CA292&q=oxford%20malmaison&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=og&sa=N&hl=en&tab=wi

Part Nine
The London house was still quiet when Xander slipped through the kitchen door. He’d left Oxford as soon as he’d come off the phone with Giles and for once the traffic was relatively light. Even so, it had taken him the best part of two hours to get back. He was relieved that, because it was the weekend, there was no rush hour to contend with, so he consoled himself that it could have been a lot worse. The way things had been going, he would take any good karma he could get.

Making his way quietly along the back corridor, he was conscious that most people were probably still asleep and winced as he hit the floorboard by the broom cupboard door that always creaked. It didn’t matter how many times he travelled this route, he always forgot about that board. He paused before the door to the library, the room that Giles with universal tacit consent had appropriated as his office, his hand straying upwards to straighten his patch, before turning the handle and pushing the door open.

“Hey, Giles, I’m back,” he said.

Giles looked up from the papers he was studying. “Any problems?”
Xander knew the seemingly innocuous question was Giles code for ‘did anyone try to kill you?’ He appreciated the concern, however it was couched, and he shook his head. “Not so far. So, you going to fill me in with the latest what’s what?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to wait until we’re all gathered.”

“Ask and you will receive, Rupert.” Xander turned and Spike was leaning against the door frame, smirking. “Heard you come in, trying to be all stealthy. Still need to work on that.”

“Yeah, I know. That floorboard gets me every time. You’d think I’d have learned by now, but nope, old habits die hard.”

“Talking of dying hard, our couple on the train died very messily.”

“Couple? On the phone Giles just said there had been a murder, but I guess I was in a bit of a rush to get out of the hotel after finding the note, to wait for more details.”

“Yes, well, I think under the circumstances, a discreet and
rapid exit was the appropriate course of action.” Giles smiled at Xander and then smoothed one hand across the book, open in front of him, like the movement somehow gave him focus. “But even so, my apologies Xander. I had forgotten you’ll not have seen the rather lurid headlines, complete with allusions to Agatha Christie and demands for the police to call in Belgian detectives. It was a young couple who were murdered. Newlyweds, a fact that has only ratcheted up the tabloid frenzy further, as you can imagine. They were on their way back from honeymoon in Italy. Apparently, the Orient Express trip was a wedding gift.”

Xander stared at Giles, horrified. “Jesus, that’s awful. I’m kind of scared to ask, but how did they die?”

“Their throats were slit, or at least that’s what the papers are saying. I’ve been unable, so far, to find out if that hid any other kind of wound.”

Xander closed his eye and the scene in the bar carriage played in his head. The young couple had been laughing and holding hands, oblivious to anyone but themselves. They’d been so wrapped up in their own little world, that whatever had happened, they wouldn’t have seen it coming until it was there. He opened his eye and Spike
was watching him and it was obvious from the expression on his face that the same scene was going through his mind as well.

“And there was a note, you said?”

“Yes, there was. With the number three on it.” Giles paused as the library door opened an inch at a time and finally Andrew stuck his head in, looking nervous. “Hmm, sorry to interrupt you all, but Xander, there are two policemen in the dining room. Detectives. They’re not here to eat, or I hope they’re not, because I don’t think I’ve got enough eggs to make breakfast for them as well, but I didn’t know where else to put them. They want to see you and Spike, except they said William, but I know they really mean Spike.”

Giles nodded to Andrew before directing his gaze back to Xander and Spike. “I assume they’ve gone through the manifest of the train and are interviewing all the passengers, to see if they can shed some light on what happened. I believe being helpful would be the appropriate course of action.”

“You mean, helpful about the murders on the train, Watcher?”
“Yes, Spike. I believe that’s exactly what I mean.”

Xander looked from Spike to Giles, acknowledging the subtext of the conversation and then stuffed his hand in his pocket of his jeans. “Here,” he said, holding out a piece of paper. “This is the note that was in my bag this morning. If we’re going to talk to the police about the murder on the train, I really don’t want this burning a hole in my pocket.”

“Thank you, Xander, that’s very wise. Now, please, you’d better go. It would be prudent not to keep the policemen waiting.”

The two detectives were standing by the window of the dining room, looking out onto the street and they turned in unison as Xander and Spike entered. One was tall and thin, with wavy, slightly thinning, short, blond hair and a neat moustache. His partner was smaller, with short, dark, curly hair and a face that looked like it would be at home inside a boxing ring. The both wore dark suits and the boxer held a manila folder in his hand.

“Hi, you wanted to see us. I’m Xander. Alexander Harris and this is”

“Thanks for your time, gents. I’m Detective Sergeant Yapp," said the thin blonde, "and this is Detective Constable Graham,” he continued, gesturing to his partner, who just nodded in acknowledgement, but didn’t speak. “I’ll not beat about the bush, I’m sure you’ve seen the headlines, so you’ll know why we’re here.”

Spike and Xander both nodded, although Xander realised that, technically, he hadn’t actually seen the headlines himself, but that probably wasn’t the point right now.

“Please, won’t you sit down?” He gestured to the dining chairs around the long table and, by invitation, pulled one out and sat. Spike remained standing, one hip leaning casually against the smooth edge of the polished mahogany.

“Thank you, Mr Harris, but I’ll stand. Got a bit of a back problem,” Yapp explained and Xander winced in sympathy.

“No problem. So I’m guessing you’re checking all the
other passengers on the train. What can we do to help?"

“You were travelling on the train back from Venice. Can I ask you what you were doing in Venice?”

“Sure, I was collecting a rare book for my boss.”

Yapp nodded and jotted something down in his notebook, before looking back up. “What do you do, exactly, sir?”

“I work for a small, private import/export business – antiques, rare items,” Xander replied. “It’s interesting work and takes me all over. My employer will vouch for me. I can call him, if it would help?”

“Perhaps later. Mr Harris, why take the train when it’s so much quicker to fly? And more particularly, why take that train? The Orient Express is a bit extravagant for a business trip, I would have thought.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to blame me for that,” said Spike.

Yapp looked at him enquiringly. “Mr Baskerville, do you also work for this company?”
Snorting derisively, Spike took his time lighting a cigarette, like he could make the detectives wait all day for his answer. “No. You might say I’ve got independent means. Old money, I suppose you’d call it.” The emphasis on the ‘you’ made Xander wince. “I was in Venice on business of my own and when Xander collected the book he was after, I decided to travel back with him. I’m the one who persuaded him to take the Orient Express and I paid for the tickets, as I’m sure you’ll know, if you’ve checked the billing arrangements.” The look exchanged between the two detectives showed clearly that they’d done exactly that.

“So Mr Harris, Mr Baskerville, do you remember seeing the victims on the train at all?”

Yapp gestured to his silent companion, who opened the folder in his hand and pushed a photograph across the table in front of Xander. He winced at the starkness of the crime scene against the opulent background of the cabin. He looked back up at Yapp, who was watching him closely. “We saw them in the bar,” Xander confirmed. “It was busy and we were passing the time trying to guess other people’s business. It was fun.” Xander took a deep breath and leaned forward, his elbows resting on the table top. “Jesus, I can’t believe this. They were at the
end of the carriage, at a table for two. They were holding hands and laughing and sipping their drinks like giddy teenagers who thought they might be caught by the grownups.”

“You seem to remember them very clearly, Mr Harris? For people you’ve never met before, I mean.” Yapp looked at him, his expression managing to be both bland and curious at the same time. Xander would have given it a 9.5 for execution, if the conversation hadn’t been so serious.

“It was difficult to miss them. They just looked so damn happy and we guessed they were probably newlyweds. I can’t believe we saw them and now they’re dead.”

“Did either of you see anything that could be termed suspicious? Anything at all.”

Xander glanced over at Spike who was leaning over the back of the neighbouring chair, but Spike just shrugged. “I don’t think so,” Xander replied. “The carriage was pretty crowded, as I say. We had a couple of drinks, had dinner and then turned in.”

“What about the following day?”
Xander rubbed at his eye patch, trying to decide how to describe the experience of being stuck in a small cabin with Spike for most of the day, when Spike intervened, with a smirk in Xander’s direction. “We spent it in the cabin. You know, if you’re going to spend all that money on a travelling sitting room, you want to squeeze every last penny out of the experience.”

“Thank you Mr Baskerville, you’ve been very helpful.”

Spike waved his hand, like the thanks of mere policemen was beneath his notice. “So was there anything else?”

“Not for you. We won’t keep you any longer.” Spike straightened up, and Xander pulled himself out of his chair.

“Mr Harris, could you stay for a moment.”

Xander glanced at Spike and then back at Yapp. He wanted to say no, but realised that he had to be cooperative. “Sure,” he said, hoping he sounded convincing.

“Do you want me to stay too?” Spike looked bored, as if
he really didn’t care what the answer was.

”No, that’s all right, sir, we just have a few additional questions for Mr Harris.”

“Xander, do you want me to stay?”

The bored look was still there, but Xander had known Spike long enough to know the question was genuine. He smiled his thanks. “No, it’s fine. But if you wouldn’t mind letting Giles know that I’ll be a bit late for our meeting.”

Spike nodded. “I’ll do that.” With a last curious look at the two policemen, he left the room, closing the door quietly behind him and Xander sank back into his chair, wondering what else they could ask.

He leaned forward and looked directly at both men. “I don’t know what I can add to what I’ve already told you, but obviously anything I can do to help.”

Yapp smiled. “I appreciate that. We both do. So you were in Oxford yesterday?”

“Yes, yes I was,” Xander replied, startled. “How did you know?”
“You were staying at the Malmaison.”

“Yeah,” he said slowly, sitting back in his chair. “They converted an old prison into the hotel. It’s a bit freaky, to be honest, but I guess it’s a good marketing gimmick.”

“You think of prison as a gimmick. Does that mean you don’t take the penal system very seriously, Mr Harris?”

Xander looked at them warily, realizing that the conversation had gone downhill. “No, that’s not what I meant. I take it very seriously. I just thought using a prison as a hotel was a bit weird. But I guess it’s no weirder than folk converting a church into apartments, or someone renovating an old lighthouse.”

“I suppose there is the element of people experiencing the darker side of life, vicariously, even if it’s only for an overnight stay. A bit like people visiting Alcatraz.”

“I guess,” Xander said doubtfully. “Look, what’s this about? I get that you needed to talk to us about the train journey, but how did you know I was in Oxford.”

“Why were you there?”
“I was at a graduation do. Someone I know through the trade. I’d just got back from a business trip and wanted a little downtime. Although the party was a bit lame, so I turned in early and caught up with my sleep instead. “

“What time did you leave the party?”

“I don’t know. About ten, I guess. Look, what’s this about?”

“You went all the way to Oxford for a party and then didn’t stay?”

“Stupid, I know, but it was fancy dress which I hadn’t realised and that's so not my thing. But I don’t see what that has to do with anything. You still haven’t told me where you’re going with this. This chat to someone you thought might have seen something suspicious on the train, is turning into something that feels kind of like an interrogation.”

“Where were you between 10.30 and midnight?

“What?” His heard sank as he thought about the note, and a small part of his brain congratulated himself on
having the foresight to give it to Giles, while the rest concentrated on getting through the conversation in one piece. “Like I said, I went to bed. It could have been 10.00; it could have been 10.30. I didn’t check. I didn’t know someone would be asking. Oh, and I phoned a friend.” Xander thought that he wouldn’t mind doing the same now, because asking the audience didn’t feel like an option, but he decided that the joke wouldn’t go down well under the present circumstances. “We talked for about an hour. I used the hotel phone, so you could check their records.”

“We’ll do that.”

Xander noticed that they’d dropped the ‘sir’ somewhere along the way. “You still haven’t answered my question, and I’ve asked it two or three times now. Why are you asking me this, because at the moment I’m adding two and two and getting answers I really don’t like.”

“Did you know a Thomas Douglas?”

“Not that I know of. Why?”

“He’s dead. He was found this morning, on the patio of the hotel. He’d had his throat cut.”
“What?”

“You sound surprised.”

“Surprised? Of course I sound surprised. I am surprised! Shocked! Horrified, even. God! That’s just awful. But you don’t seriously think I had anything to do with it, do you?”

“Well, you can see why we might. You were on the same train as the young couple who were murdered. You arrive in London and then go to Oxford and someone dies in the same way.”

Xander knew that it looked bad and that it would look even worse if they found out about the other note or, god forbid, the other deaths. He also knew that the one thing he had on his side was his innocence. “Okay, I can see why you might jump to that conclusion. But honestly, I didn’t know this guy. I’ve never heard of Thomas Douglas, as far as I know, never mind met him.”

The second detective, who still hadn’t uttered a single word, re-opened the file he had been holding the whole time the conversation was going on. He pulled out a
second photograph and handed it to Xander.

“Do you recognize him now?”

The photo showed the body of a man. Everything but the head and neck was covered by a sheet and he could have been asleep, if it wasn’t for the gash at his throat, vivid against death-pale skin. Xander noticed overturned patio chairs and realised that whoever he was, he’d struggled, but it hadn’t done any good. He started to shake his head, sure that he’d never met this man when he noticed the barrel of a gun on the edge of the frame. It looked like an old gun and he felt his heart sink. “He was a pirate,” he whispered. “At the party, he was dressed as a pirate. I ran into him, literally. Turned round and didn’t see him. Spilled the remains of my beer down his shirt.” He stared at the photo and then back up at the detectives in shock. “He was annoyed because he thought my eye patch was fake. That it was the only effort I’d made to dress up, while he’d gone all out. He tried to pull it off and then stopped when he realised it was real. He looked horrified. I apologized for spilling the beer and ruining his shirt. I gave him ten dollars, I mean pounds, for a pint by way of apology. Then I went to bed.” He glanced back down at the photo again and then handed it back to the silent detective. That’s the last I
saw of him, I swear. You have to believe me. I hadn’t seen him before and I didn’t see him again. I didn’t kill him.”

He wanted to say that it all had to be a coincidence, but the same snarky voice as before reminded him that he didn’t believe in coincidences, so he just stared helplessly at the detectives, wondering what to do next.

The impasse was broken by the door opening and he turned to see Giles standing in the doorway, Spike at his back.

“Xander is everything alright? William told me the policemen wanted to know if you saw anything suspicious on the train, which is as it should be. But I don’t understand why they are still here.”

“Giles, I…” Xander trailed off as Yapp cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, this is Mr Giles, the owner of the business I work for. Giles, this is Detective Sergeant Yapp, and Detective Constable Graham.” He glanced back at the detectives to check whether he’d got the designations correct, but didn’t get any response. Before he could say anything else, Giles stepped forward, extending his hand and giving the pair no choice but to acknowledge the
nicety.

“A pleasure, I’m sure, gentlemen. Can I be of assistance?”

“Giles, there’s been another murder. In Oxford. In the hotel I was staying at last night.”

Giles looked startled. “Good grief, that’s dreadful.” He paused, glancing from Xander to the detectives. “You don’t think Xander had anything to do with this, do you?”

“As I was explaining to Mr Harris, we have three bodies with their throats cut. Bodies found in two locations where he was also present.”

Spike pushed himself off the door jamb he’d been leaning against. “Along with a pile of other people, I’m guessing. Harris couldn’t kill anyone. Hasn’t got the stomach for it.”

Xander couldn’t decide if he was pleased Spike was actually standing up for him, or pissed at his obvious distain for Xander’s weak stomach.

“Thank you for your opinion, sir, but we don’t work with opinion, we work with facts. And the facts are that Harris
was on the train and in the hotel, which in our book makes him a suspect.” Xander noticed he’d not only lost the sir, but the way Yapp had reflected the use of ‘Harris’ back at Spike, he’d lost the ‘Mr’ now as well. He wondered hysterically how long it would be before his name was just ‘bitch’. While he was trying not to look freaked, the detective continued, “so I’m asking politely, at this point, that he come back with us and help answer some questions more fully.”

“Giles?”

“Do as they ask, Xander. I’m always telling you how superior the British justice system is, compared to the American one, so now you have an opportunity to see that at first hand. You know you are innocent and I know that as well, so it’s best just to get it sorted out. However, I do know an excellent lawyer whom I will contact immediately. This is purely because you are unfamiliar with the way things are done here, so I would counsel you to wait until he joins you before you continue your conversation with the good detectives.” He looked over at Yapp, raising his eyebrows. “I trust you have no issue with that gentlemen?” giving them no choice but to shake their heads.
“If you’d like to come with us, I’m sure as your boss says, we’ll get this sorted out in no time,” Yapp said, but Xander could tell by his tone, that he was thinking something quite different.”

Looking helplessly at Giles, Xander could only nod and haul himself out of his chair. “Okay, I guess, if it will help.”

Yapp walked towards the door and after a second Xander followed, conscious of Graham closing in behind. Giles had moved back towards the door, next to Spike, and Xander paused as he passed them.

“It’ll be fine. Don’t worry, you didn’t do anything.”

Xander smiled, knowing he should be heartened by Giles reassurance, but he knew that his smile was fake and from the look on Spike’s face it was obvious to everyone else. “Yeah, sure. I’ll see you in a little while. Tell Dawn, I’ve got a present for her. I’ll give it to her when I get back.”

Spike nodded. ‘I’ll tell her. And Rupert’s right. You know you’re innocent. So do they. So let your Brief do the talking and you’ll be fine.”
Xander nodded, but before he could reply, Yapp stopped in front of Spike. “Mr Baskerville, before we go, where were you last night between 10.00 and midnight?”

“I was here. Mr Giles here can verify that.”

“Indeed, I can, gentlemen,” Giles confirmed, his tone simultaneously commanding and reasonable, and Xander has to stop himself giggling hysterically at such a perfect example of the British class system in action.

Yapp nodded. “Thank you, sir. I do appreciate your cooperation.” He looked back at Xander. “If you’re ready?”

Nodding reluctantly, Xander took a breath and followed Yapp out into the hall and out of the door, Graham at his heels. When he got into the back seat of the police car, he pondered the irony of waking up that morning in a decommissioned prison and the possibility that he could be going to sleep in one that was very much in service.

Part Ten

Xander heaved a sigh of relief when the lawyer dropped him off at the back gate. He thanked the man for his
undoubtedly, very expensive kindness and made his way up the path to the kitchen door, pausing before he turned the door handle to wonder that it had only been eight hours since he’d last opened the door, on his return from Oxford that morning. Eight of the longest hours of his relatively short life. He retraced his route from earlier, walking slowly through the narrow back corridor, from what had been the servants’ quarters in grander days, until he came to the library. Subconsciously, he noted that he’d actually avoided the creaky floorboard that normally caught him out, but he was too exhausted to celebrate the victory.

The library door was ajar, and as he pushed it open, Giles stood up and came towards him, worry clear on his face. “Xander, thank goodness you’re back. I was beginning to get concerned. Or should I say, even more concerned.”

“Yeah, I’m back. I’m fine, Giles. The lawyer you sent was great. I’m just freaked that I needed one. The police don’t have anything other than the circumstantial evidence that I was at both locations, although they did point out multiple times, that was pretty damning in its own right.”

“But they are satisfied, yes?”
Xander slumped on to the Chesterfield to the side of Giles’ desk and Giles returned to his normal seat. “I wouldn’t say they were satisfied. There’s no crime scene evidence they can pin on me at the moment. Though I’m guessing that, unlike CSI on the TV, they won’t have everything processed between two sets of MacDonald commercials, so I guess they think there’s still time. They wanted to hold me for longer, but like I said, your lawyer knew his stuff. So at the moment they’re just pissed and frustrated, which I can understand…” He trailed off and stared at the floor.

“Xander, are you alright?”

“Yeah, sure,” he replied, refusing to look up.”

“Xander, please. It’s okay to be upset. It must have been extremely traumatic.”

Giles’ tone was gentle and concerned, and that, more than anything, made Xander look up. He wiped the back of his hand across his eye. “It’s just… God, Giles, I was really scared. I knew I was innocent, but I also knew I was lying to them.”
“You are innocent. You didn’t kill that man, or the couple on the train, so you didn’t lie.”

“What do you call it then? Sins of omission? I know about Rosanna, and Elena, and about the baby slayers, and the notes. It’s all connected. If they knew about all that, it wouldn’t matter how good a lawyer I had, there’s no way they would have released me. I’d probably be on the front page of tomorrow’s tabloids as the next Jack the Ripper.” He ran his fingers through his hair and then linked them both in his lap, trying to stop them from shaking. “I know your brain starts to do funny things when you’re under stress. But by the end, it felt like I’d been there for days. And for the last couple of hours, it was just me, the lawyer and that detective constable, Graham. Yapp disappeared, like he didn’t need to hear any more. And the other one just kept going back over the same questions, again and again. In the end I wasn’t sure whether I was giving the same answers, or contradicting myself. When Yapp finally came back, he did the whole ‘don’t leave the country without checking in’ shtick. It was like an episode of Law & Order, with more Britishness.”

“Well, I can put your mind at rest on one matter. The reason Yapp left you for those last few hours, is because
he came back here. He wanted to corroborate parts of your story and he also wanted to confirm that Spike was indeed here in the house, when the murder took place in Oxford.”

“The sneaky bastard!”

“An extremely effective sneaky bastard, I would say. Although, objectively, he was only doing his job. It was to be expected. He’s a good detective, unlike the ones we were used to in Sunnydale, and he did his due diligence. Spike was on the train with you, so potentially he could have been your accomplice. It would have been remiss of Yapp if he had taken Spike’s rather convenient answer, that he was here all the time you were in Oxford, at face value. Fortunately, I was able to answer all his questions about you and could say, with complete honesty, that Spike was here last night. Yapp also got confirmation from Andrew and several of the younger slayers. So unless he’s able to prove that there is a giant conspiracy, he doesn’t have a leg to stand on.”

“And the fact that there is a giant conspiracy, is beside the point,” replied Xander morosely. He thumped his head against the back of the Chesterfield and then looked up at Giles. “What am I going to do, Giles? This is
just so screwed.”

“Well, the first thing I’m going to do, is pour you a drink. Think of it as being medicinal.” Leaning down, he opened a deep drawer in his desk and pulled out a bottle of Glenmorangie and two small crystal tumblers. He poured two liberal measures and passed one glass to Xander, who took a slow sip of the malt before swiveling around, stretching his long legs out along the polished leather and leaning back against the arm of the Chesterfield.

“So now that I’ve reverted to Harris type and am looking for answers in the bottom of a glass, what do we do?”

Giles chuckled. “If I really thought that you were going to lose yourself in the bottle, I wouldn’t have given you a drink. Things look difficult at the moment, I know, but they have been difficult many times in the past. We will do what we’ve always done in the face of doom and gloom. We gather the clan and find a solution.”

“Just like that?”

“Perhaps a little effort might be required, but we’ve never failed before. Don’t despair, we will get there.”
“Yeah, and it’s the question of where ‘there’ is exactly, that always bothers me,” Xander muttered as he studied the deep golden colour of the whisky and listened with half an ear to Giles lifting the phone and speaking quietly for a moment.

“I’ve asked Spike, Willow and Dawn to join us,” Giles said, putting down the phone. “Buffy is out on an early patrol, so I will bring her up to speed when she returns. But while we are waiting for them, let me reassure you about one of your other worries. The police will not find out about the other notes. They have the one from the train, but have nothing else to connect it too, considering there was no note on the body in Oxford. They will not find out about Rosanna, or Elena, or Ginny and Maureen. I know this is distasteful, but there are some practices from the old Council that it has been prudent to retain. The covering up of supernatural deaths is one of them.”

Xander grimaced at the thought. “So they just disappear, like they didn’t matter?”

“We’ve been over this, Xander. They mattered. They mattered very much. That’s why we can’t have the police involved. If the people we mourn become more widely known, they also become a statistic in a police report,
and a name in a front page story tomorrow, that will be the day after’s fish and chip paper. That is when they won’t matter.” Giles paused, taking a sip of his malt before continuing, “I know it’s unpalatable, but you have done such things yourself when slayers or others who were involved have been lost. You have helped take them home without causing anyone in authority to notice. I know this feels different, but really, objectively, it isn’t.”

“I know,” Xander replied softly. “But it really doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“I know, but it’s the best I have.”

Xander slipped his malt slowly, while Giles moved around the library, lifting and laying books and papers into small stacks and piles that Xander was sure made sense to him. The library door opened and Spike strode into the room, Willow and Dawn at his back. Xander gave the girls a weak smile as they leant over the back of the Chesterfield to give him a hug and soft words of greeting and encouragement. Spike just nodded and made straight for Giles’ desk.

“Right, Rupes, I’ll have whatever he’s drinking,” Spike
said, with a nod at Xander’s glass.

Giles sighed, but didn’t argue, walking purposefully back to the desk and pulling out another tumbler to pour Spike a measure. From the look on Giles’ face, Xander thought he was probably just grateful Spike hadn’t helped himself and appropriated the whole bottle. As if to back up the thought, Giles poured himself a second shot, but Xander noticed that the bottle didn’t come in his direction. He thought tiredly that it was probably just as well.

“Cheers mate,” Spike said, tilting his glass towards Giles, before slouching over to take up his preferred position, leaning against the wall where he could see everyone else and the door.

Willow sat in the chair closest to Xander, with Dawn on her other side. No one spoke for a moment and finally Giles broke the silence. “So, we have a situation and we need a resolution. I suggest we review what we know.”

Spike snorted, his derision obvious. “Good plan, Rupes! What we know is that we have seven bodies. Two of them our own and five non-combatants, although two of them had connections. We’ve got three cryptic notes,
we’ve got Harris questioned by the plod and we’ve got two mystical books about magic and family connections linking them all. That’s all the ingredients, now we just have to put them together and bake a bloody soufflé. Simple, yeah!”

Apart from their initial greetings, both girls had been quiet since entering the library, but as Spike spoke, Xander noticed Dawn stiffen and then turn her head to glare at Spike. “Well you’re the one who’s full of hot air, Spike, so we’ll let you get on with that.”

'Okay', Xander thought, there was still some bridge building to do there, before they were back on civilised terms, and he wondered briefly, when it had become important that Spike and Dawn starting talking again.

His thoughts were interrupted when Willow jumped out of her seat and waved her hands to get their attention. “Hang on, let’s go back a bit. How did we reach the conclusion that the books were at the bottom of this?”

“Well it’s obvious. It’s all down to Harris,” Spike said, waving his glass in Xander’s direction. “He was collecting the books and the killings started. Cause and effect. Simple.”
“On the surface, perhaps” Willow replied. “But we know that Xander had already sent the first book back to us, when Rosanna was killed, right?”

She looked to Xander for confirmation and he nodded slowly. “Uh huh. Melina and I had confronted Tiago about his stupid advances towards Rosanna and that’s how I found out he was the person I was looking for to get the book. It was one of those weird things that happen sometimes, you know?” He glanced at Giles, who nodded encouragingly. “Anyway, once we’d kicked some chaos mage butt, or to be more accurate, once Melina had threatened to castrate him, I collected the book and Willow teleported it back here. But that was days before Rosanna was killed. And I didn’t know, at that point, that there was a second book. I didn’t know until I spoke to Giles, on my cell at the station. So until then, no one could have known I was going to go and get the other book.” He paused and looked back over at Giles, questioningly. “Did you know about the second book when you sent me to Lisbon?”

Giles shook his head. “No I didn’t. If I’d known, I would have told you. I wasn’t aware of the existence of the second volume, until I started to look through the first
book. There were various, inevitably cryptic entries which indicated the existence of a second text. Believe me, Xander, if I’d known, or thought, that your job in Lisbon was anything more dangerous than a simple locate and pick-up, I would have warned you and sent suitable backup.”

“Yeah, I know, but I guess we just need to work this all through, step by step.”

Spike lit up, ignoring the glare that Dawn and Willow sent his way. “What about the Venice killing? Harris was in Venice to collect the second book. It’s too much of a bloody coincidence.”

Willow chewed at her thumbnail and then started pacing, muttering under her breath, like Xander remembered from school when she was trying to work through a particularly tricky problem. After a moment she paused by Giles’ desk and looked over at Spike. “You’re right, Spike, there are too many coincidences. I mean, look at the name you’ve adopted, ‘Baskerville’. And then we had a murder on the Orient Express, for goodness sake. We’ve got Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, now all we need is a bit of Dorothy L Sayers and we’re all set.” She stopped and looked at them all in turn. Xander could see
the glimmer of comprehension on Giles’ and Spike’s face, but looking over at Dawn, he was slightly comforted that she looked as confused as he felt.

“Will...? Xander said tentatively. “You want to give us the Cliff Notes?”

She tucked a stray bit of hair behind her ear and smiled at him apologetically. “Sorry. But it just struck me when I thought about Sayers. Five Red Herrings. The books are just red herrings, it’s not about the books,” she said triumphantly.

Spike took a long puff of his cigarette, his eyes half shut as if he was considering Willow’s thoughts. “Okay, that’s another theory. I haven’t thought of Sayers in years. Dru used to love a good murder mystery. The higher the body count, the better. Always preferred Mickey Spillane myself, but she loved a good whodunit – the butler, in the library, with the candlestick, that sort of thing. Good weapons, candlesticks. Get one with a nice heavy base, got some decent heft behind it, can make a nice dent in someone’s skull.”

“Okay, that’s just disturbing.” Xander shuddered a little, just to emphasise the point. “It’s bad enough that I
dreamt of your ex last night."

“You dreamt about Dru?”

“In all her wacked out glory.”

“Why the hell didn’t you mention this before?” Spike demanded.

“Well excuse me for getting side tracked by finding out that two people had been killed on the train we were on, then finding a note that might mean I was the next target. Oh yeah, and then getting a visit from a couple of policeman who told us about another murder in the hotel I was staying in, before hauling me off to be interrogated for eight hours, because they think I’m the next Hannibal Lector.”

“Hannibal Lector is a fictional character, Xan.” Willow said gently.

“Well, you know what I mean!”

Spike sipped at his malt, meditatively, for a moment and then walked across the room to sit on the edge of Giles’ desk, ignoring the glare he got. “You lot can bloody well
stop glaring at me every time I do something you don’t like. It’s getting very old.” He took a long, deliberate pull on his cigarette then glared back in turn at Giles, Willow and Dawn before turning his attention back to Xander. “So you dreamt about Dru? What was in the dream? Going to tell us about it?”

“Are you fed up of being Conan Doyle and now you want to be Freud?”

Spike grinned. “They were both doctors, but to be honest, I think Conan Doyle has more to say about the way the human mind works, than Freud ever did.”

Gritting his teeth, Xander turned to Giles. “Is any of this relevant?”

“To be honest, Xander, I have no idea. But it’s as relevant as anything else at the moment. Please, just humour me, if you don’t want to humour Spike. Tell us about your dream.”

“Okay,” Xander replied with a sigh. “In my dream, Drusilla was standing by the window of my hotel room, in the moonlight. Then she came towards me and stood by the bed. I couldn’t move. She was rambling about stuff
that didn’t make any sense. There was something about presents and birthday cake, oh and mummy’s milk.” He stopped and looked at Spike. “She’s just as crazy in dreams as you always said she was in real life, I don’t know how the hell you put up with her all that time.”

“I loved her.” Spike shrugged. “Put up with a lot of shite, for love. But back to the bloody dream, was there anything else?”

Xander frowned, trying to think back to the impressions he’d been left with when he woke up. “She was counting and singing. And she was saying something about me getting presents and her getting presents.”

Giles leaned forward. “Xander, this could be important. You say she was counting? What was she counting?”

“She was singing and counting. She was counting, oh fuck! She was counting up to five.” He looked at Giles, horrified. “But how the hell did she get into my dreams to do that? I know she can do some mojo, but that’s pretty big. And it’s weird. I’ve never really been able to remember dreams before, apart from that one with the First Slayer, but I can remember bits of this. It’s…” he groped for the words to explain his impression. “It’s like
looking through some sort of cracked mirror. It’s like the picture’s all there, but it’s all in fragments and all jumbled up.”

“Simple, mate. She wasn’t in your dreams, was she? You told Rupes you found another note in your bag in the morning. So you weren’t dreaming, she was there in your room.”

“What! But that’s crazy. There’s no way she was in my room. I probably just had some bad shellfish, or maybe too much bitter. Or maybe I was just still freaked about all the deaths so far and my subconscious did the rest.” He looked wildly from Spike to Giles and then slumped back against the hard leather of the Chesterfield when Willow squeezed his hand. “Oh fuck! But..but why? The books are here in London, so what was she doing in Oxford? Oh god, if it wasn’t a dream, that means she probably killed the guy in the hotel.”

“Looks like it.”

“But that would mean she killed everyone else. Rosanna, Elena, the young couple on the train and Maureen and Ginny. God, why? I don’t understand. Why would she want those books? Why would she kill all these people?”
“I don’t like to admit it, but now that we’ve added Dru into the mix, I think Red’s right; it’s probably not about the books. Dru doesn’t need a couple of mouldy tomes about family magic. She’s not interested in what makes the baby slayers tick. She’s not interested in how the activation spell worked. She’s got enough magic of her own. It’s about you. It’s about how you tick. That’s what matters to her. You’re the only other thing linking the deaths. I reckon she’s been following you right across Europe.”

“What!” Xander stared at Spike, shaking his head in disbelief. “But that’s nuts. You’re trying to tell me this is one of Drusilla’s cracked party games? That I’m the target of an undead stalker?”

“More than that, mate. This is Dru I’m talking about. She doesn’t do things by halves.” Spike slid off the edge of Giles’ desk and covered the few steps to the Chesterfield. He stood, looking down at Xander, an expression of what might have been pity on his face. “This is no game. You’re the target of an obsession.”
Part Eleven

Spike’s comment came like a punch in the guts and Xander struggled for breath, for a moment, before shaking his head in protest. “An obsession,” he echoed. “But...but that’s crazy in so many ways. One, I’m not someone that other folk get obsessed with. Two, I haven’t seen Drusilla in years, so she’s got no reason to be obsessed. Three, what do all these deaths have to do with this so called obsession? That’s if you believe this shiny new theory, which I don’t. I believed the last one, about the books, and now you’re saying that was wrong, so this one is probably just as wrong. Yes, she was in my dreams. But we know she’s powerful. She could do that, right? She could get into my dream?”

Giles pushed himself out of his seat and walked around the side of his desk, perching on the edge next to where Xander sat on the Chesterfield. The gesture was so informal that Xander’s heart sank. “I know this is difficult, Xander. Normally I would applaud anything that would discredit any of Spike’s more outlandish theories, but unfortunately, this one does make some sense, in these
circumstances.”

“Well Halle-bloody-luiiah, the Watcher actually agrees with me.”

“I said it makes some sense, Spike, don’t push me,” replied Giles acidly. “It’s an unpalatable thought, but if Drusilla is obsessing, we need to understand why.”

“In Dru’s head it makes sense. That’s all that matters.”

Xander looked from Giles to Spike and back. “But why? I don’t understand. I know I keep saying that, but really, I don’t. I mean, I had a dream. Honestly, that’s all it was. It was freaky and disturbing, but hey, we’re talking about Spike’s ex here, so that’s a given. But it was a dream, that’s all it was…” He trailed off, realizing that he didn’t sound convincing, even to himself.

A small hand came to rest on his shoulder and he turned jerkily to see Willow standing at his side. “Sweetie, I know this is difficult,” she said, soothingly. “But what about the note? Giles told us you found the note with ‘five’ on it, in a pocket of your backpack, this morning at the hotel. Are you sure it wasn’t there the night before?”
Xander shook his head. “No, I’m sure. It’s the pocket I keep my i-pod in when I travel. I took it out when I was getting changed for the party. I know it’s a bit OCD, but I have my stupid rituals when I unpack. Getting my i-pod and my book out and putting it by the bed is part of that. Sometimes I like to listen to music, if I’m not in the mood to read before going to sleep. But last night, I talked to Dawn on the phone instead, so I didn’t do either. But I definitely took the i-pod out and put on the nightstand and it was the only thing in that pocket.” He rubbed his hand tiredly across his face. “It really wasn’t a dream was it?” he whispered. “It was real. She was in my room. And left the note. And killed that guy.”

“We don’t know that for sure, but it’s plausible and that’s a more solid foundation than we’ve often had to work on.” She rubbed her hand up and down his arm comfortingly and he closed his eye for a moment, accepting the gesture for what it was, before opening it up again and looking up at her.

“So what now?”

Giles leaned forward, his hands clasped and resting lightly on one knee. “Now we get back to Drusilla. Can you remember anything else? Anything at all that might
be relevant.”

Xander shrugged wearily. “I don’t know. I think I’ve told you everything.”

“Xander, please. Imagine if there are more deaths planned and you could stop them.”

“You don’t need to do the guilt trip, Giles. I got that covered all by myself,” Xander said tersely, before looking down at his whisky glass and then at Giles, Spike and Dawn, who were watching him with varying degrees of sympathy and expectation. Willow squeezed his shoulder lightly and he sighed. “Okay. So she was counting and singing, like I said. Talking about cake and tea and parties and birthdays. And there was something about blackbirds. Yeah, blackbirds and whitebirds. Or maybe it wasn’t blackbirds, maybe it was black birds.” He paused, trying to order his thoughts. “Though does that mean she was talking about white birds? Or maybe we should split the difference and make it grey birds. Giles, you ever hear a prophecy about grey birds?”

Giles shook his head, smiling briefly. “I can’t say that I have, Xander, but please continue. You’re doing well.”
Xander took a deep breath, trying to focus his memory back on the previous night. A picture of Drusilla coalesced in his mind, her black hair gleaming around her shoulders, contrasting with the translucence of her skin. ‘Black birds, white birds, such pretty birds’, she seemed to whisper in his head. ‘Got to find trinkets and treats for the nest.’ Xander’s head snapped up and he stared at Giles. “Definitely black birds and white birds. Got to find trinkets and treats for the nest. That’s what she said,” he whispered.

“Fuck!” The curse seemed to echo off the wooden paneling in the room and Xander jerked his head around to look at Spike, who was snapping his Zippo on and off. “Black birds and white birds?” he said. “Or maybe black and white birds. Does that sound like Magpies to you, Watcher? Stealing bright things and eating other birds’ eggs.”

“Possibly? But I don’t see your point, Spike?”

“Dru loves poetry. She loves rhymes and riddles. The boy’s right, she’s as crazy as a loon some days, but even at her worst, she always has her own logic. She has a thing about progression and rhythm. There was a rhyme she used to love. Used to chant it for hours sometimes,
driving me potty.”

“And...?”

“The rhyme was a list,

“One for sorrow,

“Two for mirth”

Spike pushed off of the cabinets and began to walk slowly along the long wall of the library,

“Three for a wedding,” the Zippo clicked on and a small flame burned brightly.

“Four for birth,” the Zippo clicked off and Spike turned as he reached the end of the wall.

“Five for silver,

“Six for gold,” he leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. Xander could almost see him searching his memory for the words.

Spike opened his eyes and met Xander’s gaze. “Seven for
a secret not to be told.”

He began to walk back towards the library door. Xander could only see his face in profile as he paced. Curling his fingers around his knees, Xander gripped hard to try to stop his hands from shaking.

“Eight for heaven,” the Zippo clicked on again, and a cigarette appeared, as if by magic, in Spike’s other hand.

“Nine for hell,” the cigarette was lit. Spike brought it to his lips, took a long puff and turned to face his audience.

“Ten for the devil’s own sell.”

Spike took another long drag and the silence hung heavy in the room once the chanting stopped.

Xander uncurled his hands slowly, laying them flat on his thighs. He took a shaky breath. “Okay,” he said, quietly. “That’s definitely different. Is there any more, or is that it?”

Spike shook his head. “Nope, that’s it, as far as I can remember. But there are various versions, including a bastardised one used by a kids programme in the 70’s.”
He smiled briefly, like he was reliving a fond memory and Giles cleared his throat to interrupt the moment.

“I hardly think it’s worth considering that particular version, Spike, however appealing Miss Stranks may have been. But you are right, there are various version of this rhyme and I don’t have them all to hand.”

Dawn jumped up. “I could go to the British Library if you like, Giles? Do some research on the alternative versions?” She glanced at her watch. “There’s an hour until it officially closes at 8.00.” She twitched her middle fingers in the air as she emphasized the word ‘officially’. “But if I drop your name, I think I could persuade one of the senior librarians to let me play in the rare books section for a while longer.”

“That would be most helpful, Dawn, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“No biggie. If it’ll help Xander, then I’m all for it.”

She'd turned to go when Spike took a step forward and then stopped. “Dawn,’ he said. “Just remember,” he paused as Dawn folded her arms and looked at him warily. “I wouldn’t put it past Dru to have done a bit of
pick and mix from several versions, until she got a progression that tickled her and suited her purpose. It might not be as straight forward as you think.”

Dawn raised an eyebrow and Xander wondered if she realised it was a perfect imitation of Spike’s usual expression, but he knew that it probably wasn’t the best time to point that out. He settled for a plea of his own. “Spike’s right, Dawn. Don’t give yourself a headache on this. If you can’t find anything quickly, come home and we’ll try again tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay,” she replied. She kissed Xander quickly on the cheek and left before he could say anything else.

Xander stared at the library door she’d left half open, then turned back to Giles. “Maybe I should go with Dawn and help with the research? I could get books off of the top shelves for her!” He looked around expectantly, hoping for support, but then he caught the way Willow was glaring at him. Not for the first time, Xander realised that Willow’s resolve face from their younger days had been replaced by the even scarier ‘do as you’re told or I’ll make you sit next to Andrew at dinner’ face. Xander knew when he was beaten. “Okay, point taken. But you know I don’t think there’s anything else to remember. At
least, nothing comes to the surface right now. And even
if you’re right, and Dru is behind this, what the hell is the
rhyme about? And why some numbers and not others?”

Willow leaned on the back of the Chesterfield and took a
breath. “Okay,” she said, “let’s start with the facts. We
have seven bodies that we know of.” Xander shuddered
at the implication of her dispassionate comment. “We've
also got three numbers – three, four and five. That begs
the question, why are one and two missing? Or were the
first two bodies irrelevant?” She waved her hand in
Xander’s direction. “And I’m sorry, I really didn’t mean
that the way it came out,” she said, biting at her lip in a
gesture of contrition that was so familiar, Xander could
picture it all the way back to kindergarten.

He smiled slightly, acknowledging Willow’s preemptive
apology and then sat upright as a thought occurred to
him. “Maybe there wasn’t time to leave notes? There
was an alley that cut through the courtyard where I
found Rosanna. I came in one way and I remember the
echo of footsteps and a flurry of birds on the roofs at the
other side, they were squawking like they’d been
startled. Maybe whoever killed Rosanna, and I know you
want me to say Dru, but I’m trying to be open-minded
guy here. Maybe the footsteps were from the killer?
They heard me coming in and left by the other exit, in a hurry.”

Spike nodded. “That makes some sense. If Dru was just at the start of one of her games, she wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise so early on. When I found Elena in Venice, the kill had just happened. It was near the house. I didn’t hear any disturbance, but it was obvious that it was fresh.”

Giles nodded. “Thank you, both of you, that was most helpful. Haste and disturbance is a very likely explanation for the lack of notes. Or at least, it is the best one that we have at the moment.”

“Or she could just be messing with our heads by deliberately starting at three, just so we’d spend time trying to work out why the first two notes were missing!”

“Also a fair point, Spike. I bow to your superior knowledge of how Drusilla’s mind works. Whatever the explanation, it doesn’t bring either Rosanna or Elena back to life, so, without being disrespectful to the dead, it may be more productive if we can move on to the more tangible clues that we do have. According to the rhyme, ‘three is for a wedding’ and with the information
we now have, the line fits with the death of the honeymooners on the Orient Express. “

“What about four and five?” Spike asked.

“Four is for birth and five is for silver,” Giles said thoughtfully. “I confess I don’t immediately see the connection. What we do know, is that the number four was left with two dead slayers.”

Groaning, Spike leaned his head back against the bookcases at his back. “It was easier when we thought it was all about the books. The idea of family magic and birth kind of goes together.”

“Oh, oh…” Willow jumped up from the arm of the sofa, where she had been perched at Xander’s shoulder. “I think Spike’s got a point!”

“I do?” Spike asked dubiously. “Well, yeah, ‘course I have. Wouldn’t have said it, otherwise, would I?”

Willow snickered quietly, before turning to Giles. “What about the spell? The girls were potentials before the spell. Now they’re all slayers, so I guess you could say, we kind of gave birth to them. Or at least the spell did.”
“Thank you, Willow, that’s a very good thought,” Giles said, nodding in approval. “It’s a viable explanation for that line. But I don’t understand why the gentleman in the hotel would be ‘silver’. Remember also that the note was left with Xander.”

Xander didn’t acknowledge the comment. He had twisted himself sideways on the leather Chesterfield and drawn his legs up, making himself as small as he could, while everyone talked casually about death and obsession. He rested his chin on his hands, clasped over his knees, and he had closed his eye, while he tried to work through the night in Oxford and everything Dru had said to him in his so-called dream. A phantom pain hovered over the socket of his missing eye and, out of habit, he reached up to adjust the strap. The movement pulled back a memory, like he’d been slapped in the face.

“She said ‘Yo ho ho and a dead man’s chest,’” he whispered. “’No heart beating in a dead man’s chest.’”

“Yeah, and...?”

The guy who died was dressed as Jack Sparrow.”
“And I’m sure there’s a point to that comment that you will get around to eventually?” Giles expression was so reminiscent of a hundred similar expressions from long ago library sessions, when they’d talked about pop culture Giles didn’t pretend to understand.

“Think about it. This is Drusilla, nutty as a fruitcake and twice as scary as Buffy’s meatloaf. Silver... like maybe Long John Silver. She didn’t care what pirate it was. The poor guy didn’t need a peg leg and a parrot. He was a pirate and that was good enough.” He looked at Spike. “That’s how she might think, right?”

Spike smirked. “Oh, I can see that one happening all right.”

“I’m afraid you’ve still lost me,” Giles was now starting to look more annoyed than confused.

“Sorry, Giles,” Xander said contritely. “Jack Sparrow is the latest pop culture pirate. He’s all over the place – film, books, posters, theme park rides. I guess he’s this generation’s Long John Silver. Dru went looking for a pirate and she found one.”

Giles nodded. “Alright, I will take your word on the pirate
reference. So, given that, if we’ve got the logic of the three notes, can we extrapolate the logic to the two that she might not have had a chance to plant?”

“One for sorrow. I’d take an educated guess it’s because she knew how I’d feel about finding Rosanna’s body. You should have seen Melina...,” he trailed off.

“Two for mirth,” said Spike, stepping into the awkward silence. “The attack in Venice was savage. She had fun killing so close to the Watcher’s house. It’s all about risk and reward. We did it enough times over the years that I should have recognized it. She had a ball with that killing.”

Xander tasted bile in his mouth as a brief vision of Elena, lying on the canal-side flashed through his mind. He swallowed, forcing the taste and the memory away and made himself focus on the present. “So we've got a possible explanation for the first five lines of the rhyme, as they relate to the deaths. What about the other five?”

“I don’t know, Xander,” Giles said tiredly. “I wish I did.”

“So it could be completely random people that I’m maybe going to run into in a bar. I mean, if she’s really
getting at me?"

Spike sighed and banged his head back against the cabinet of books at his back. “You’re not giving this one up, are you? She’s getting at you, believe me. I know my Dru.”

“Our Dru! How disturbing is that?”

“Sorry, old habits die hard.”

“You’re seriously telling me that she could kill someone like the mail guy, just because I stopped to say hi?”

“Now you’re getting it. Finally!”

“Jesus!” Xander ran his fingers back under his patch, rubbing at the nagging pain that only seemed to get worse with each passing moment. “If she kills again, I’m going to have the police back at the door wanting to know where I was.”

“I know how she thinks. That’s one thing we’ve got going for us.”

“Okay, what does she think?”
“She’s going to wear you down. Or at least, she’s going to try. Learned at the feet of a master, didn’t she? She’s going to try to rip your life apart, bit by bit, until there’s nowhere left to run. That’s why she came into your room and whispered in your ear. That’s why she left the note with you and not with the pirate, to prove that she can get that close to you before you even notice she’s there. Look at you already. Seven bodies that could be traced to you, if the plod did their homework. Already been arrested. You’re shaking, even though you’re trying to hide it. How long until you crack, do you think?”

“I’m not going to crack!” Xander shouted and then stopped, horrified, as he heard the waver in his voice.

“Course you’re not,” replied Spike knowingly. “At least, not until she starts on the people you really care about.”

“I think perhaps you should leave the comforting to others, Spike,” Giles said reprovingly. “Your bedside manner leaves something to be desired. It would be more productive if we concentrated on what the other lines of the rhyme might refer to.”

Xander closed his eye, going over the words of the rhyme
as far as he could remember, and then opened it with a jerk and pushed himself up off the Chesterfield in one movement. “Oh god, ‘gold’. I’ve just realised. I’ve been bitching about it since Venice, but it didn’t click. Giles, where’s Andrew?”

A/N: In case anyone is wondering, the reference to Miss Stranks is about Susan Stranks, a kids TV presenter on Magpie, a bi-weekly ITV kids magazine show in the ‘70’s. Magpie was always seen as slightly hipper and raunchier than the more staid BBC equivalent, Blue Peter, and that reputation was partly down to Susan Stranks, an object of many a teenage boy’s lust! The programme used a very kid-friendly version of the rhyme as its theme song!

Part Twelve

Xander felt the phantom pain in his left eye intensify as he combed the rooms and corridors of the old house. When he’d first arrived in London and seen the house, he’d wondered how everyone planning to live there would fit in. But he’d soon learned that, as with so many older houses in London, it was like a TARDIS, relatively small and innocuous on the outside, but huge on the
inside. As well as the normal kitchen and bedrooms, bathrooms, dining room and living room, there were attics, and cellars, and pantries, and rooms he didn’t even have names for. He knew that some of the younger slayers thought it as a great place to play hide and seek, even if they wouldn’t admit to playing such childish games. On another day, the thought would have made him smile, but now he was doing the ‘seeking’ for real, the game didn’t seem so much fun anymore.

They’d searched the kitchen first, Andrew’s usual domain. He’d given up cooking on a regular basis, after the first slayer rebellion over a failed attempt at Klingon Goulash, but he still used the room and the attached office as his base of operations, for keeping tabs on everyone’s movements and working out the logistics of what was needed where and by whom. Xander had surveyed the white board on the office wall, with its intricate grid of numbers, letters and codes that meant something only in Andrew’s head, and was grateful that the police hadn’t had a search warrant when they’d come earlier, because he’d have had no idea how to explain what some of the things on the board meant.

Andrew wasn’t in the kitchen, or the office, and Xander followed the narrow stone-flagged corridor towards the
cellars. As he reached the top of the steps, Spike appeared from below, shaking his head at Xander’s look. “He’s not down there. No reason why he should be, but I thought I’d check anyway.” He looked at Xander questioningly. “Are you sure about this?”

Xander shrugged. “No, I’m not sure. But then I’m not really sure of anything now. Dru’s your ex, what do you think she’d do if she was following the rhyme? That’s if you’re right about the rhyme! If she’s looking to tie in something ‘gold’ then that damn gold card is the only thing that I can think of. It’s about as warped as Jack Sparrow being a Long John Silver surrogate, but it’s all we’ve got. God knows, I hope I’m wrong.”

“I don’t think you’re wrong. I wish you were because, although it bugs me that Dru might think the little tosser is important enough to be on her sodding list, at the same time, I wouldn’t wish her attentions on him, for anything. It’s just like her sense of humour to give Andrew some kind of importance in death that he didn’t have in most of his life.”

“He’s not dead yet!” Xander had to stop himself from yelling, but his voice still echoed in the narrow, stone flagged space.
Spike just raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips at Xander’s outburst. “If Dru’s got him in her sights, he’s as good as dead,” he said baldly. “Poor sod maybe just doesn’t know it yet. I’m thinking we’re going to have a lot of bad news to deliver – that blonde at the Stag’s Head, the red head at the Rose and Crown and the big man down Smithfield Market. I’m guessing he’s not going to take the news well.”

“For fuck sake, Spike, will you shut up?” Xander clenched his fists until he could feel his nails digging into his palms. The pain made him focus. “We haven’t found him yet,” he said, trying to sound calmer than he felt. “He could be down Smithfield right now, for all we know, getting nailed six ways from Sunday. I could just be jumping at shadows!”

“Could be. It’d make a change from tilting at windmills. That was something Dru always liked about you, even when you were a scrawny pup. You got her attention then and looks like you’ve still got it now.”

“Well I wish she’s take her attentions somewhere else.” Xander leaned back against the wall and rubbed distractedly at his eye-patch. “You know, I don’t know
what I’ll do if he’s dead because of me.”

Sighing, Spike stepped forward, and raised his hand as if he was going to clap Xander on the shoulder, but after a brief moment he withdrew, as if he’d thought better of the action. He pulled his cigarette packet out of his pocket instead, studying it briefly before looking back up. “We don’t know anything for sure, just yet. Yeah, I know I’ve been trash talking, but that’s just me. We don’t know anything until we find him. But whatever happens, it’s not your fault. Blame Dru and all the stars that whisper in her ear. Blame the spread of the cards she’s probably looking at. Or blame Angelus for breaking her in the first place. But it’s not your bloody fault, so get off your cross, already!”

Xander nodded half-heartedly at Spike’s attempts to cheer him up, and then pushed himself away from the wall quickly when he heard the footsteps echoing on the stone flags. Despite the noise, the footfall was quick and light and he glanced at Spike breathlessly, before staring back down the corridor, praying it was Andrew, scurrying like the white rabbit, always late on an errand for one slayer or another. The footsteps paused at the intersection between the office and the pantry, then started towards them.
“Andrew,” he shouted, his voice loud in the small corridor. “Andrew, is that you?”

“Xander?” Xander’s shoulders slumped at Willow's reply. She appeared around the corner, in a swirl of long skirt and outdoor coat. “I thought you might be down here. I’ve searched the rest of downstairs and Giles searched upstairs, including the attics, though there’s no reason why Andrew’d be up there.”

“There’s no reason why he’d be in the cellars either,” Xander replied, “but we had to check, to be sure.” He looked questioningly at her coat. “Are you cold?”

“What? Oh no. I was going to check the back yard, but I wanted to see if you’d had any luck down here, before I went out and got soaked?”

“It’s raining?”

“Oh yeah, cats and dogs. It must have started about half an hour ago, but we are all too tied up with everything else to notice.”
“Rain in summer, in England, colour me surprised!”

Spike growled softly and Xander and Willow turned, looking at him in astonishment. “Fuck, the pair of you really are fully assimilated aren’t you! Got Dru on the loose and loser boy missing and you two are talking about the bloody weather!”

Xander stared at Spike, wondering, not for the first time, at how quickly the vampire’s mood could change. The attempt at making him feel better might never have happened from the way Spike glared back. “It’s called gallows humour, Spike,” he said slowly. “I thought you, of all people, would appreciate it.”

“Yeah, well, the only gallows you’re going to be building is your own, at this rate.” He shouldered his way past Willow and strode off down the corridor. “Let’s get a brolly and a torch, and check outside,” he threw over his shoulder. Without waiting for a reply he turned the corner back towards the kitchen and the back door.

Willow took hold of Xander’s hand and he looked down at it, noticing for the first time in forever how small it was, compared to his. It fit snuggly, soft and white in his big callused palm and he curled his fingers round,
cradling it, and squeezed gently. She squeezed back. “Come on,” she said, “We’d better go, or he’ll just be in an even grumpier mood.”

Xander smiled briefly, nodded and they walked hand in hand along the corridor towards the kitchen. Just before the door to the cloakroom the short corridor opened up to the left, to give a narrow view of the main hall and staircase. Giles had told them months before that it was designed as a discreet viewpoint for servants to view the comings and goings of guests without being seen. As they passed by, Xander paused when he saw four sets of teenage legs dangling through the wrought iron railings of the banister. He glanced back at Willow. “Do the slayers know what’s going on?” he asked quietly.

She shook her head. “We haven’t said anything specific. Obviously, they know something’s happening, but no details. They know about Ginny and Maureen, but that’s normal territory. Or as normal as it gets around here. Giles said he wanted to find out more about the rhyme and then he’d call a meeting to lay out what we know so far. He didn’t want to worry them until we had more concrete information. In the meantime, we’re making sure that the younger ones are always accompanied by someone experienced, if they go out.”
“Makes sense, I guess. No point in causing more panic than we have to.” He looked again at the dangling collection of legs, clad in odd socks adorned with an eclectic mixture of stripes and polka dots and although he couldn’t see the upper bodies they were attached to from where he was standing, he reckoned he could pretty accurately name the owners of the socks if he had to. The thought made his breath hitch in his throat and he had to give himself a mental shake when Willow nudged him.

“Come on,” she whispered. “Enough wool gathering. They’re safe and nothing is going to happen to them. Right now, we’ve got an Andrew to find.”

Willow had said it was raining, but standing at the kitchen door, peering out, Xander decided that she either had a gift for understatement or the weather had got worse in the few minutes it’d taken her to track them down.

“Bloody hell, it’s pissing out there,” said Spike, looking over Xander’s shoulder. “If the little tosser is out there and he’s still alive, I’ll fucking kill him myself for making me go out in this.”
Xander turned and threw Spike a withering look before hunting through the coats and jackets on the coat stand by the kitchen door. After discarding a furry pink Parka and an electric blue Mac, he finally unearthed a battered Barber and waved it at Willow triumphantly. “Is Giles going to join us, or do you think I can borrow his coat?”

Willow slapped herself lightly on the side of the head. “Oh shoot, I forgot about Giles. He finished looking upstairs, but Dawn called while you were down in the cellars. Her car won’t start and the AA couldn’t get out to her for ages; they’ve probably got a backlog because of this weather. And of course, she rushed off to do the research and didn’t take her purse, so can’t get a cab. So, long story short, Giles has gone to pick her up.”

Xander looked from Willow to Spike and back again. “ Couldn’t we just have paid the cab when she got here? Saved Giles the trip? I mean, cab drivers do let you do that, right?”

“I did suggest that, but Giles insisted. To be honest, I think he wanted the excuse to visit the British Library after hours. You can take the watcher out of the school library, but you can’t take the librarian out of the
watcher.”

Xander snorted, grabbed his boots and put them on the kitchen table. At Willow’s frown, he picked them up again with one hand and was trying to manoeuvre the other arm into the sleeve of the waxed jacket, when the kitchen door burst open and a drenched Buffy hurtled into the kitchen. She rushed forward and threw herself at Xander, clinging tightly as she caught her breath. He dropped the boots back on the table and pushed her away gently. “Buff, what’s wrong?”

“You’re okay,” she said breathlessly. “I was so scared when I saw him. I thought you could be hurt, or dead, or worse.”

“What happened? Was it something on patrol?”

She shook her head, and water from her hair splattered across his face. “Andrew. He’s in your car. He’s dead.”

“So you were right,” mused Spike, but Xander was already gone, pushing past Buffy and Willow as he fled through the open kitchen door and out into the darkness and the rain, Giles’ coat forgotten in a heap on the floor and his boots abandoned on the table.
The path was narrow and overgrown with lavender, herbs and roses. On a summer’s evening he loved the walk down to the old coach house that now served as a garage, breathing in the heady smells from the garden. But as he ran down the path, gravel sharp under his stocking feet, his only thought was of another body that could be laid at his door.

The door to the coach house was open and the light was on. His car was almost spot lit in the surrounding darkness, like the central prop in his own macabre play. Xander stumbled to a halt, on the threshold, then forced himself to walk forward until he had a perfect view of the scene. He was aware of Spike, Willow and Buffy arriving at his back, but his attention was focused on Andrew.

He sat in the passenger seat, the seat belt snug across his chest and hips and his hands folded primly in his lap. It was a scene that was almost normal, bringing back flashes of memory of trips to the supermarket, or rare outings to the countryside outside of London, when he’d always insist on riding with Xander. But it wasn’t normal, the two delicate fang marks in his neck and the small smear of blood across his throat, that might have been made by a finger or a tongue, were testimony to that.
“I was coming back from patrol,” said Buffy softly. “I came in the back gate and saw the light was on. I came to see if you were here, or if you’d forgotten to switch off the light. I found him like this.” Xander felt her hand on the small of his back, but ignored it, staring instead at the driver’s seat where a doll sat in the place he normally called his own, it’s blank, black stare echoing Andrew’s dead eyes. It wore a white, full length, crushed velvet dress, edged with grey lace and its long dark hair was carefully arranged around its shoulders. Its face was geisha pale, with a crimson smile that seemed to tilt up slightly at the edges, like it knew secrets it wouldn’t tell. The cream edge of an envelope peeped out from under the edge of the dress and Xander’s stomach roiled at the thought of having to reach between the doll’s splayed legs to get to the message he knew would be there.

Buffy started to rub circles in the small of his back. He knew they were meant to comfort, but they just made him shiver. “We’ll take care of him, Xan,” she whispered. “Go back to the house. Get dry.”

He shook his head to argue, but the doll’s eyes, black and fathomless, seemed to look into his soul and he turned away, walking passed the other three and out into the
rain. Standing just beyond the doorway, he stared up at the night sky. He couldn’t see the stars because of the downpour and the man-made glow of the street lights, but fleetingly, he wondered if Drusilla could? If she could see through the gloom or just visualize them through the whispers in her head - Ursa Major, Ursa Minor, Cygnus, Cassiopeia, Hercules and Perseus. He felt like he could almost hear her chanting their names. But then the imaginary voice grew sly at the names of the heroes and Xander shuddered under the weight of the deaths that were laid at his door.

He knew the note would say ‘six’ and the weight of guilt made him sway, until he was kneeling on the path, heedless of the torrent battering down and the stones boring into his knees. Tears coursed down his face, mingling with the rain, as memories of every annoying, stupid thing and every well-meaning, ill-conceived gesture Andrew had ever made, crashed in on him.

The rain stopped, or at least that was the way it seemed, as finally he tasted the salt of his tears. He looked up to find Spike standing over him, wielding an umbrella like a weapon that could defend him from the universe. “It’s both our faults, you know.” His voice started as a whisper. “If you hadn’t made him give you that fucking
gold card, she wouldn’t have killed him. If I hadn’t grumbled about you having the card, she wouldn’t have killed him.” He knew his voice was getting louder as he spoke, but he didn’t care. "She knew about it,” he shouted hysterically. “She must have heard me bitching about it on the train, or the platform, and she killed him.”

Spike looked down at him, his face half shadowed by the umbrella. “You didn’t kill him. Neither did I. It’s one of her games. If it hadn’t been this one, it would have been something else. Maybe someone else. But she’d still have killed.”

“I don’t understand,” Xander said, looking up at Spike in anguish, searching for an explanation, like a child asking impossible questions of an adult. “Why is she doing this?”

“Because it’s fun. Because she can.” Spike paused, seeming to weigh up his words before he spoke again. “Because she’s grooming you.”

“For what? I don’t understand.”

“Told you before, she learned at the feet of a master. She wants you. Wants to turn you, I’m guessing. If she’d
wanted a pet or a toy, she’d just have taken you. Broken you in her own time. But I reckon she wants you to give up. She wants you to surrender to her. To be malleable. So she’s doing what was done to her. It’s the only thing she knows.” He held out his hand. “Come on, get up. You’re getting soaked there and we need you fully fit if you’re going to fight this, not coming down with sodding pneumonia.”

Xander stared at the hand for a moment, before grabbing it like a lifeline and hauling himself upright. He crowded under Spike’s umbrella, until they were almost nose to nose. “Kill her for me, Spike,” he pleaded. “Please, can you stop her? Can you stop this?”

Spike shook his head regretfully. “I can’t. I’m sorry. Not because she’s my ex, or my sire. But I’d never get near her. She’d sense me coming a mile away and she’d be gone.”

“So what do I do?”

“You don’t do anything, mate. We try to anticipate her next move.” Spike’s voice was firm and determined and Xander felt the hopelessness loosen its grip very slightly at his words. “We work on the rhyme. Keep everyone
Spike turned and Xander followed, still sheltered from the rain as they made their way back up the winding path to the kitchen door. He knew that Willow and Buffy were tending to Andrew, back in the coach house, just as Annunciata and Gabriella had tended to their dead in Venice. The comparison made him shiver and he was hyper aware of how chilled he was from the downpour and how the tiny pieces of gravel hurt as they dug into his feet.

The kitchen door was still open and he paused in the doorway, peeling off sodden socks, before padding to the table and collapsing into one of the wooden chairs. He thought about shifting his boots off the table, but decided that, in the scheme of things, it really wasn’t important. He contemplated the blotches on the tile left by his walk across the kitchen and looked up at Spike wearily. “I’ve got wet feet,” he said. “Andrew’s dead and I’ve got wet feet.”

“Got more than wet feet. You’re soaked to the skin. Yes, Andrew’s dead. Can’t bring him back, so we move on. Come on, get yourself dry.” Spike pulled a hand towel from the rack by the fridge and shoved it into Xander’s
hand. “Blot off the worst with this and then go have a shower and get warm, yeah?”

Xander stared blankly at the towel before twisting it in his hands. “I need to keep them safe, Spike,” he said, never taking his eyes off the corkscrew of the damp cloth. Whatever it takes, I need them to be safe. I need them to understand how screwed up this is.”

“They understand.”

Letting the towel drop to the floor at his feet, Xander looked up at Spike. “I’m scared. I’m so damn scared. I don’t think I could bear for it to happen again.”

“I know,” said Spike softly, bending down to pick up the towel and put in on the table. He paused as if working out what to say next. “I’m going to phone the Watcher. Give him the heads up on what happened. He should be on his way back by now.”

Xander nodded, leaned back against the hard wooden back of the chair and closed his eye while Spike lifted the phone. He listened with half an ear, conscious of the vampire drumming his fingers in time to the rain battering against the window as he waited for the
answer at the end of the line. The drumming continued until Xander became almost hypnotized by the rhythm and he realised with a start that it was all he could hear in the silence. He opened his eye and stared at Spike, horrified at the implication.

“Bugger isn’t answering his fucking phone. It just rings. Git never got around to fixing up his voice mail.”

“Do you think...?” Xander could hardly bring himself to ask the question.

“I don’t think anything,” Spike replied quickly. “They’ll be stuck in traffic. Euston Road is a nightmare at the best of times, but in this weather, it’ll be hellish. Either that or they’re cosied up with some musty old tome in one of the private reading rooms and not looked at the clock. Dawn’s as bad as Rupert when it comes to getting carried away with the books.”

“Yeah, I guess. They won’t be long.”

Spike stooped to pick up Giles’ jacket off the floor where Xander had dropped it in his flight to the coach house. He hung it back on the coat stand by the backdoor of the
kitchen. “That’s right, pet,” he said. “I’m sure they won’t be long.”

**Part Thirteen**

It wasn’t long. But it was long enough to rip Xander’s world apart.

He stared at the fire burning brightly in the grate, but it might as well have been ashes for all the good it did. He didn’t think he’d ever be warm again. Dawn and Giles were dead. Dead, because of him. He curled up in the armchair as much as his long legs would allow, cradling a small, velvet covered box in one hand and closed his eye. Somewhere in the far reaches of his mind he’d been conscious of people coming and going throughout the day. Willow had checked on him, bringing him food and fussing softly when a tray of grilled cheese sandwiches and coffee sat untouched and cold, hours later. Buffy was trying to be a general, marshalling her slayers; he could hear the echo of their chatter and their tears, floating down from the second floor. The sounds pushed gently at the cotton wool around his consciousness, just there, but not quite strong enough to penetrate. Spike had banked up the fire and smoked an endless chain of cigarettes quietly by the window, watching the afternoon shadows lengthen into evening. In the midst of
devastation, everyone still had a purpose and a job to do. Everyone, except for him.

His job was to sit, frozen, counting the beat of the hours passing, while the chime of the carriage clock by the door marked out the no man’s land of time, reliving the nightmare hours of the early morning, when the unexpected sound of the doorbell and the clang of the mailbox heralded the clatter of a set of bloody car keys onto the polished hallway floor, causing chaos in the house.

They were Giles’ keys and Xander knew in his gut what they signified, but it hadn’t stopped him from hoping, with all his heart, that he was wrong. He and Spike had left Buffy trying to corral the younger slayers, while Willow tended to Andrew in the spelled cellar that doubled as a mortuary. How fucked up was his life, he thought dully, that capacity for a mortuary had been a must have when they’d started house hunting.

They’d searched the streets around the British Library and finally found Dawn’s beat up Volkswagen, tucked in behind an industrial dumpster in Cartwright Gardens. She was curled up in the back seat, like she was sleeping. The sweep of her long hair, caught loosely with a scarlet, silk
ribbon tied in an elaborate bow, fell over her shoulders, neatly covering the bloody mess of her mangled throat. A copy of Ten Little Indians, bookmarked by heavy parchment paper with the number ‘seven’ written in elegant copperplate, lay on the floor at her feet and Xander swore then, that when he next saw Dru, he would make her eat her words, one bloody note at a time.

The memory of the thought was a fleeting comfort, before his brain forced him back down the rabbit hole of his grief. Dawn was dead, but there was a strange decorum in her death. Dru had taken care to arrange the body just as Rosanna’s had been, as if she was remembering the girl she once was, before Angelus had made her life hell. There'd been nothing decorous in her treatment of Giles, stuffed into the too small trunk. Spike called it a boot, he thought hazily. It didn’t really matter; it was all semantics. Changing the word, wouldn’t change the sight of Giles, crammed into the trunk of Dawn’s car, his body contorted into an impossible shape, like a discarded doll, put out with the trash when it wasn’t wanted anymore. Xander had cried when they’d found Dawn, but the sight of Giles had put him beyond tears.

“What’s in the box?” Xander started, then relaxed when Spike appeared at his elbow.
Looking up at Spike and back at the fire, he wondered briefly when Spike had started to become a not quite comforting, but somehow reassuring, presence in his life. He suspected it was sometime in the last few hours. Dropping his eyes to the box in his hand, he stroked his thumb along the nap of the velvet, being careful not to disturb it. “It’s a present for Dawn. Was a present for Dawn,” he corrected, gripping the box tightly as his hand started to shake. “I bought it in Venice, but with all the madness, I hadn’t had a chance to give it to her. And now it’s too late. She made me promise to bring her back a present from Oxford. It was the price for not waiting for her to come back from Devon, before I left for that stupid party. I said I would, knowing I already had this for her.”

“What did you get her?”

Xander shifted the small box onto his lap and carefully lifted the velvet covered lid. Inside was a delicate glass key. It looked transparent against the white satin interior, but when he held it up, it captured the light and the depths sparkled a subtle forest green. “I saw it in a little glass studio in Venice. I played hookey for a couple of hours, when I first arrived. That’s why I didn’t get to
Gabriella’s until dinner time. Giles hadn’t said getting that damn book was urgent, or anything, and I needed a little bit of time to get my head together, so I went shopping.”

Hunkering down in front of Xander’s chair, Spike traced a finger down the side of the fragile ornament. “It’s beautiful. She would have loved it.”

Xander placed the key back on its satin bed and carefully closed the lid, terrified that his shaking hands would drop it and the key would shatter, like the fragments of his life. “But I didn’t…I didn’t get to give it to her. I thought we had all the time in the world. I should have known better. But she was created before time. Of all people, she should have been here, so that I could give it to her.”

“That’s why you need to take care of it. Keep it safe, yeah? Remember her and fight for her. For her and the Watcher. Don’t let Dru win.”

Gripping the jewellery box tightly with one hand, Xander dragged the back of his other hand wearily across his face, rubbing monotonously across his good eye, until Spike grabbed him by the wrist and pulled it back down to rest across his knee. “God, Spike, what she did to Giles
- squashed into that tiny trunk, like so much trash.”

“Yeah, I know. She didn’t even bother to give him a number. At least Dawn got acknowledged in a twisted way– number seven – ‘the secret never to be told.’ But nothing for Rupert. That’s Dru all over. The Watcher was incidental. Not important to her. That’s almost the biggest insult. He didn’t register on her radar, other than as someone who was in the way. That’s how it’s always been with her. If you’re part of her plan, she’ll take all the time in the world. If you’re not and you get in the way, you’re just a bug to be squashed.”

The sound of a strangled laugh stopped any reply Xander might have had. They both turned to see Buffy standing by the door and they rose to their feet simultaneously, as she walked towards them.

“Well, this bug has got a pretty nasty bite,” she said. “That bitch is really going to hurt when I get a hold of her.”

Xander placed Dawn’s gift carefully on the mantelpiece. “I’m sorry, Buffy,” he whispered, his voice cracking as he looked at the weariness and grief etched on her face. “I’m sorry I was too late. I’m sorry Giles went to get her,
instead of me. I’m sorry I didn’t connect Andrew to the gold card in time.”

“Shh,” she said softly, putting her arms round his waist. “It’s not your fault. None of this is your fault. The only one to blame is Drusilla and I’m going to kill her.” Her tone was matter of fact, but Xander could hear, with the ease of long practice, how close to tears she really was. It just branded the guilt even deeper on his soul.

They stood holding each other for another moment, until a cough made him raise his head and he saw Willow standing in the doorway, watching them solemnly. She looked tired and her face was even paler than normal. Xander knew without being told that she had waited until she was alone before she’d cried. He wanted to comfort her, but as if she knew what he was thinking, she shook her head. “I’m sorry Xander,” she said. “The policeman, from before, is back. He asked if he could speak to you?”

“Um, sure. Sorry. Bring him in.” He gave Buffy one last hug and glanced at Spike, but his face was impassive, so Xander took a deep breath and took up a defensive stance, his back to the fireplace, steeling himself for whatever was coming next. Buffy nodded to Willow and
then withdrew to a chair in the corner near the window, where she could see the door. Xander was reminded of Spike, standing in the library, positioning himself where he could monitor all the comings and goings in the room.

Yapp was alone this time and Xander worried that perhaps his sidekick was waiting round the corner with reinforcements. Willow ushered the detective in and, despite the trauma for the previous hours, Xander couldn’t help a vague inner smile at the deference shown to his long-time friend. He glanced to the side to meet Spike’s eyes and the look was enough to confirm the notion that the detective was nervous of the petite witch, even if he didn’t know why. “You remember the Detective Sergeant, Xander?” Willow said quietly. “He said he wanted another word and I said you’d be delighted. I think I’ll stay this time and hear what he has to say.”

“Thanks Will. Umm, sorry, detective. I wasn’t expecting to see you again, so soon.”

Yapp smiled and put his hands in the pockets of his coat. “It’s alright sir, I won’t keep you long.” Xander was encouraged that the ‘sir’ was back. “I’ll get straight to the point. There’s been another murder.” Xander’s heart
sank, wondering how the hell he was going to plead innocence, convincingly, when they had three bodies in the cellar. “It was down at the South Bank, near Waterloo.”

“That’s awful,” Xander said sincerely, realizing with relief that Yapp wasn’t talking about Giles or Dawn. But his relief was short lived as the possible reasons for Yapp’s visit hit him. “Are you accusing me, detective?”

Yapp shook his head. “No sir, I’m not. That’s the point of this visit. The method of killing was the same as the two other cases, but we have a very specific time frame. It happened early evening yesterday, while you were still at the police station and while I was visiting Mr Giles and Mr Baskerville, here at the house. So no, neither of you are suspects.”

“So that’s it? I’m suddenly off the hook? Not that I’m not happy not to be a suspect, but wow.” Xander paused as another thought struck him. “You’re not going to suggest that I might have had another accomplice?”

Yapp shook his head again and this time it was accompanied by a wry smile. “No sir, I’m not. I appreciate the pointer, but the fact that you are even
suggesting it, more or less rules it out in my book.”

“Although that could be my cunning plan. If I had a cunning plan, which I don’t, but if I did – “

“Harris!” Spike interrupted.

“What?”

“I’d quit while you’re ahead. The nice detective has just said he doesn’t think you’re guilty, so you might want to stop finding ways to put yourself back in the frame, yeah?”

Raking his hand through his hair, Xander looked at Spike, then at the detective. “Sorry,” he said sheepishly. “It’s been a long couple of days. I think I’m just a bit punch drunk.”

“Understandable, sir. Being suspected of murder isn’t something any of us ever want to experience. But you can appreciate our position. I may still come back and ask you some questions, if we get any further leads on the Orient Express or Oxford murders. You’ll appreciate that the coincidence of you being present at both locations is still disturbing, but we know you couldn’t have been
involved in this murder at Waterloo.”

“So you’re admitting I couldn’t have done the others?”

“The hotel phone records place you on the phone from Oxford to London at the time Mr Douglas was killed. A cross reference to Miss Summer’s phone records confirms this, so no, you are no longer a suspect in that case, as the evidence stands at present. As for the deaths on the train, I only have your presence, along with every other passenger on the train, so I believe we are back at square one.”

“Okay, are we done?”

“For the moment.” Yapp smiled briefly. “I know this has been difficult and I appreciate your cooperation. I have a job to do, and I do it to the best of my ability. Perhaps it’s not as glamorous as travelling around Europe collecting antiques, but there you are. Each to their own, as they say.” He turned to go, then paused by the door and turned back. Xander had a sudden vision of Columbo, trapping the bad guy in the final minutes and he stared at Yapp anxiously. “Silly of me, I nearly forgot,” said the detective. “I have a delivery for…” he pulled an envelope out of his pocket and Xander nearly passed out when he
saw it. “For Miss Summers. That would be the lady you were phoning from Oxford?”

“It could be, she’s my sister,” Buffy’s voice wavered just slightly as she pulled herself out of her chair and walked forward, her hand outstretched. “Or it could be for me, since I’m the other Miss Summers. I didn’t realise the police were delivering mail these days?”

“The modern policeman is a multi-tasker, Miss Summers.” Yapp grinned quickly as he handed over the envelope. “However, in this case, I met a lady on the front steps of the house. She was about to put this through the door. She said it was a party invitation and asked if I would do the honours since I was ringing the bell anyway.”

“Thank you detective.”

“You’re welcome. Now I must be going. Thank you again for your cooperation. I’ll be in touch if I need anything else.” He nodded to the group and let Willow escort him out, leaving the others staring at the envelope in Buffy’s hand.

“Are you going to open that?” Willow asked, as she came
back into the room. Her question shook Xander out of the brain freeze Yapp’s visit had created.

“Do I have to?” Buffy replied. Xander could see by the way her hand was trembling that she was as freaked as he was.

He shoved his own hands in his pockets to try to hide the way they were trembling too. “If it’s another number, we need to know,” he said shakily. He didn’t really want to know, but there was no point in delaying the inevitable.

“I’m guessing number eight,” said Spike, but Xander noticed that the vampire didn’t have a hint of relish in his tone. He turned away, staring into the fire as the comment about the numbers brought back Spike’s words about the last note. Dawn was ‘seven – the secret never to be told’ and Giles, Giles was collateral damage. He felt dizzy and grabbed at the mantelpiece for support.

A touch on his shoulder from Spike pushed him back down into the fireside armchair. “Sit down before you fall down” Spike said gruffly. “Don’t second guess things. It could be another number. Could be anything. Dru’s playing with your head. With all our heads. She didn’t need Yapp to act as post boy; she just saw an opening
and went for it.”

“She could have killed him. Right here on our doorstep. Christ, no one would have believed I wasn’t guilty.” He looked up at Spike. “Why didn’t she kill him?”

“Didn’t need to. She made her point just fine. Everyone’s vulnerable.” He glanced over at Buffy. “Open the note, Buffy. Let’s see what game she’s playing, this time.”

Xander watched as Buffy stared at Spike for a moment, the anxiety he felt, reflected clearly on her face, then with one fluid movement she tore the envelope open like she was ripping off a band aid. The envelope fluttered to the floor leaving her with a 6 by 4, scalloped-edged card, like the kind you got as a wedding invitation. “It’s an invitation to the theatre,” she said, the thread of a hysterical laugh colouring her voice.”

“Got to give her points for originality,” Spike chuckled, but there was no amusement in his tone. “Don’t tell me, it’s for the National Theatre, yeah?”

“How did you know?”

“The other body Yapp talked about. It was found down
near Waterloo. I’m guessing that was the pre-theatre appetiser and you’re the main course. What’s she inviting you to see, Titus Andronicus?”

“Oedipus Rex,” Buffy replied and this time Xander could hear only confusion in her voice, but from the crack of laughter from Spike, there was obviously a joke there to be appreciated.

“Okay,” Xander said slowly, “for the theatrically challenged among us, care to share with the class?”

“Can’t beat the classics. Oedipus Rex – cautionary tale about a bloke who marries his mum, she kills herself when she realises and he gouges out his own eyes when he finds her. The first bit fits me and Dru alright, although the having sex with my Sire never bothered me, and I don’t suppose Dru’s planning to kill herself, but then she’s already dead, so it’s six of one and half a dozen of the other. I’m guessing the eye gouging is down to you. You’ve still got the one eye going for you, but the way she’s taking you apart, I guess you could call it poetic license.”

“Christ, Spike, Giles was right. I think your cheer leading skills need a bit of work.”
The mention of Giles and one of the last conversations they’d had, wiped the sardonic grin off Spike’s face. “I know. Sorry. It’s just so Dru. I got carried away for a minute. She’s always had a taste for the grand gesture. Another thing she learned from Angelus.” He looked back over at Buffy. “So what time is this invite for? I’m guessing she’s after a private performance?”

“Two in the morning, so that would be a yes.”

“You’re not going,” Spike said emphatically.

“No, I’m not going,” Buffy agreed. “When I kill her, it will be on my terms, not on hers.”

Spike nodded and plucked the invitation out of her hand, throwing it into fire. Xander watched the stiff card buckle and curl as the flames took hold, until there was nothing left but ash. “I should go,” he said softly, still staring into the fire. “This is my fault. If I go, maybe she’ll end it? She needs to tick heaven off her list. That’s the next line of the rhyme, right? Maybe if I go, she’ll be happy? Maybe it’ll be her definition of heaven?”

“Sorry to rain on your parade, pet, but you’re not
heaven. In Dru’s mind that’s going to be the Slayer. She’s been there, remember? And after ‘heaven’, comes ‘hell’ and that’s where she wants you. So neither of you are going anywhere near her, yeah?”

Xander nodded slowly and shifted until he could look Spike in the eye. “What are we going to do about Giles, and Dawn, and Andrew? What are we going to do about the bodies? If someone finds out...if Yapp comes back and discovers that they’re...that they’re...” He stuttered to a halt, unable to complete the sentence. He looked around wildly and saw the compassion in Willow’s eyes and the pain in Buffy’s and finally the tears that wouldn’t come before, when he opened the trunk of the car, flooded out. He knew that he couldn’t stop them if he tried.

He felt a small hand grasping at his shoulder and strands of red hair ticked at his nose as Willow hugged him. “It’s okay, sweetie. Cry for them. It’s okay to cry.”

Sniffing, he wiped ineffectually at the tears and bit back a hysterical laugh when a white square of cotton appeared in front of him. “Mop up and blow,” she said and he could only follow her instructions obediently, just as he’d being doing for the last twenty years of his life.
“Sorry,” he whispered, his voice thick with emotion and the aftermath of his tears. “I’m just a big crybaby these days.”

“You’re allowed.” Buffy’s voice was low and Xander raised his head, seeing the tears in her eyes that she was fighting to keep in. “We’re all allowed. And we will. But now, I’m going to sit with Dawn and Giles for a while. I don’t like to think of them being alone. We’ll work out what to do tomorrow.” She clasped Xander’s hand briefly, like she was trying to give him some of her strength in the face of her own tragedy and, as she left, Xander noticed for the first time since he’d seen her broken body lying at the base of a tower built by madmen, just how small she was. Her back was straight, but she seemed somehow diminished as a result of her loss and he wondered if, this time, they were all irredeemably broken.

Willow gave Xander a final hug and stood up from her perch on the arm of the chair. “I’ll see to the slayers who’ll be back from patrol soon. See what’s been moving and shaking, apart from the obvious.”

Xander smiled weakly. “Thanks Will. I’d kind of forgotten
there are other nasties out there.”

“How’s the hankie?”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got it covered. Oh, and Xan, keep the hankie, I don’t really think I want it back.”

He glanced down at the soggy piece of cotton bunched in his hand and then back up at her. “Thank you.” Pausing, he curled the fingers of his free hand around one small wrist. “You know you don’t have to cry alone. You do know that, don’t you?”

“I know,” she replied softly. “I’ve always known.”

She smiled as she left them and Xander looked up at Spike, who had been smoking quietly by the window, looking out into the darkness, while he’d had his meltdown.

“I really thought that Yapp knew about Dawn and Giles. I still don’t get how we could load two bodies into a car in the middle of the night, like some latter day Burke and Hare, and have nobody notice. This is London, for god’s sake, not Sunnydale.”

Turning, Spike took a long drag of his cigarette and shrugged. “It was also right in the middle of small hotel
land. Lots of twitching curtains in the day time, but they’re all locked up tighter than a nun’s knickers by midnight. And the student hall nearby helps. I’m guessing folk are used to shit going on. Anyone who saw anything would think we were helping a couple of drunks and wouldn’t give it a second thought.”

“What about Dru? What about the invitation? Stupid question, but I’m guessing it’s not a real theatre performance?

“Not so much. Though I’m sure in Dru’s mind it would be award-winning. Just not Arts Council funded, that’s for sure. But if Dru got her way, it’d be something that the stars would be singing about for years.”

Xander shivered and Spike moved away from the window, pitching the butt of his cigarette in the fire. “Right then,” he said, looking down at Xander. “The Slayer’s right, we’ll think about that tomorrow.”

“And if tomorrow never comes?”

Spike crouched down beside him, grabbed the poker from the edge of the hearth, and began to jab at the embers of the fire until a flame reluctantly sprang back
“Tomorrow always comes,” he said quietly. It’s what it’ll bring that you have to worry about.”

Part Fourteen

The fire hissed and popped as a dry log took hold and Xander shifted, half in and half out of sleep. It was still summer, he thought muzzily, there was no reason for a fire. Fires were for fall, autumn, he corrected himself, and for winter, but here in London they were for whenever the stupid British weather dictated.

Turning in the chair, he tugged at the end of the throw he didn’t remember curling up with, pulling it more snugly around his waist. After a moment his thoughts started to clear and he became aware of Spike standing by the window.

“What’s the time?” he asked softly.

“How about 1.15,” Spike replied. “Go back to sleep. Or even
better, go to bed.”

Rubbing his hand through his hair, Xander winced as his muscles complained that he was too tall and too old to be dozing in an armchair for any length of time. “I don’t think I can. I know I should but, you know…”

He glanced back up at Spike, who nodded and smiled thinly. “Yeah, I know. Surprised you got any sleep at all. But sometimes the body takes charge, when the brain is playing silly buggers.”

“I guess so,” Xander replied, pushing aside the throw and hauling himself out of the chair, stretching until he felt things tighten then relax, in his back and neck. “Where is everyone?” He knew that he should know, but his brain was foggy, and the vestiges of the catnap made him feel sluggish and dizzy.

“Witch went to do the post patrol honours, but she should be in bed by now. Slayer went to sit with Dawn and the Watcher. She should be getting some kip too, but I doubt that’s happening.”

“I should go see her.” Xander started to move slowly towards the door, aware that he was being watched,
even if Spike didn’t do anything to stop him. He’d got half way when the door opened and Willow burst into the room.

“She’s gone!” She was breathless, her face as red as her hair, and agitated in a way that Xander hadn’t seen since the last apocalypse, but one.

“What are you talking about, Will?” he managed to ask, before Spike interrupted him.

“Slayer’s gone?” It was couched as a question, but from the tone of his voice, there was no doubt that he was stating it as a fact.

Willow nodded, her hands twisting in the folds of her skirt. “I thought I’d look in on her, after I’d sorted out the slayers and done all the routine stuff after patrol. I really didn’t realise how much Andrew did for us, what with the logistics and making sure the fridge was full and everything…”

“Focus, witch,” Spike almost snarled. Xander frowned at him, as if a look would calm him down.

“What about Buffy?” he coaxed Willow to continue with
the ease of long practice.

“I was on my way to bed and I thought I’d check on her. The cellar is pretty dismal and I didn’t like to think of her down there on her own with Dawn and Giles. I know she needed the time with them, but I thought I’d just check she was alright. Well as alright as she could be. But when I got to the cellar, she wasn’t there.”

“You think she’s taken up Dru’s invite, even though she said she wouldn’t?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged helplessly. “It’s possible. Or she could have gone out on patrol, to work off some steam.” She looked at them both hopefully, but Xander glanced across at Spike and it was obvious what he thought.

“It’s not just possible,” Spike said angrily. “It’s bloody well definite. I should have known she’d pull a stunt like this. You all need fucking babysitters!”

“Hey, no one asked you to play nursemaid,” Xander snapped back and then steeled himself for whatever volley of vitriol was going to come his way. Spike’s eyes flashed from blue to yellow and back to blue again as he
took a step toward Xander.

Willow stepped between them, pushing them both back before anything could happen. “Okay. Officially not helping guys. Let’s save the bickering until after we find Buffy.”

Xander ran his fingers through his hair and smiled briefly at Willow before turning back to Spike. “Give me two minutes to grab my keys and my boots and we’ll get going.” He thought fleetingly that his boots were probably still on the kitchen table where he’d left them. Glancing at the clock on the table by the door, he noticed it was now nearly 1.30. “The invite said 2.00 so we can still head her off, if we move it. Wills, Spike and I will go after Buffy. Can you stay here in case she really is just out patrolling? I don’t want her to come back to an empty house.” It was unspoken that he didn’t want her to come back to a house where Andrew, Dawn and Giles lay dead in the cellar, but from the expression on her face, he knew that Willow understood exactly what he meant.

“I’ll do that.” She stood on her tiptoes and gave him a hug. He held her tightly, almost afraid to let her go. “Be careful,” she whispered.
He pulled back and smiled at her again, but he knew he wasn’t fooling anyone. “Always. We’ll be back before you know it.” He glanced across at Spike. “I’ll meet you at the car,” he said and strode out the door, not looking back.

Xander took a deep breath before getting into his car. It was hard to imagine that it had only been the previous evening when Buffy had found Andrew’s body. He shuddered at the thought of the black, blank look of the doll that had been sitting in the driver’s seat. ‘I hope Buffy burned it’, he thought viciously, as he slid into the seat and started the engine. The passenger door opened and Spike slipped in and glanced across.

“You okay?” he queried and Xander shook his head.

“No. But I’ll deal.” He glanced at the clock on the dashboard and the digital display told him it was 1.35. “Which way’s quickest?” he asked as he reversed carefully out of the old coach house, into the back lane, then down towards Bayswater Road.

Spike grimaced. “No really straight forward way. Could go right up to Marble Arch, turn down Park Lane, through St James’s Park towards Westminster, then over the river. Should be quiet this time of night.”
Xander nodded as he pulled out onto the main road and put his foot down. He drove quickly but carefully, not wanting to catch unwanted attention, especially after his encounters with the police over the last two days. He also didn’t want any unsuspecting officers to have to cope with Spike if they got stopped. The road was quiet apart from the usual fleet of black cabs ferrying people home, and the odd night bus circling the city, like vultures looking for prey to swallow.

Every red light found him glancing at the clock and the minutes seemed to mock him as they ticked away. Finally he reached the turn for Park Lane and he slammed on the brakes when he saw the barriers across the road and the stark glow of an ambulance light and a fire truck about 100 yards ahead. “Fuck,” he muttered. “There must be accident or something. We need to find another way.”

Spike drummed his fingers on the dashboard. “Keep going straight up Oxford Street. I’ll tell you where to turn.”

The familiar shopping street was empty of its usual throng and the garish shop signs reflected eerily on the
wet pavements. Naked dummies in a window display, as they flew passed Top Shop, gave Xander goose bumps. He could almost feel their flat eyes following him and he shivered, pressing his foot on the accelerator just a little harder.

Spike muttered directions and Xander concentrated on driving and tried not to look at the clock. 1.45, turn left into Portman Street, skirting the edge of Portman Square and on into Gloucester Place. 1.47, turn right onto Marylebone Road. The pavement outside Madame Tussauds was empty of the usual tourist queue. He shook his head as they passed, unable to understand why people would pay to see a bunch of waxworks, but perhaps it was because his own experience with the dead was so real, that the idea of looking at effigies for entertainment made his skin crawl. He glanced over at Spike whose attention was fixed straight ahead. “Why this way? It’s like we’re going in the wrong direction.”

“It’ll be quicker in the end. We go through the centre, we’ll get snarled up in all the switchbacks. This way we get some momentum going.” He glanced over at Xander. “If I was driving, I’d say sod the one-way system, but I’m guessing that’s not an option.”
“All things being equal, the one-way system can go to hell, but I’d rather not get stopped. If we’re going to be any use to Buffy, we need to get there in one piece and without the police escort.” 1.48, past Great Portland Street tube, onto Euston Road and down into the yawning darkness of the underpass. 1.49, Euston Station. He carefully avoided the stragglers wandering aimlessly across the road after missing their last train home.

1.50, turn right onto Woburn Place. He noticed the little Greek restaurant that he and Dawn had gone to once, when she’d persuaded him to act as book carrier in chief, one memorable research trip to the British Library. He tried not to think of Cartwright Gardens, just a few streets away, where they’d found her body. He realised with a start that they’d still not found Giles’ car, although finding the bodies had made the search seem unimportant at the time, but the bloody car keys were still sitting on the table in the hall. He wondered how Yap had missed them when he’d visited. 1.51, Woburn Place gave way to Southampton Row and the lights went red in his face at Kingsway. He ground his teeth in frustration, but the wail of a siren nearby stopped him from taking a leaf out of Spike’s book and jumping the light. Amber turned to green. The clock tipped over to 1.52 as he drove down Kingsway, sweeping around the
corner onto Aldwych and following the one way system to the Strand. They flew passed Somerset House, home to the summer exhibition Giles had told him he had to see. Waterloo Bridge stretched out before them, the black water of the Thames glittering in the moonlight. It was 1.55.

The bridge was broad and empty. It looked like it went on forever. Xander put his foot down and the seconds ticked passed. His eyes flicked from right to left, unconsciously absorbing the sights as they sped across the blacktop. The huge circle of the London Eye floated above the river, a giant Ferris wheel sparkling with lights, reminding him of the local fairs he’d gone to when he was a kid. Half way across, he glanced at his watch, no longer trusting the digital display of the clock. The second hand raced towards 1.56.

“Come on,” Spike muttered and Xander pumped the accelerator again, pushing as hard as he dared on their final leg.

The end of the bridge loomed and he shot a sideways glance at the vampire. “Which way now?” he asked breathlessly.
“Pull over. We’ve got a good vantage point from the bridge down to the theatre. Scope out the territory before we go rushing in.”

Nodding, Xander slowed the car down and pulled over to the side of the road, careless of the fact that he was in a bus lane. They sprang out of the car in tandem, but almost immediately Spike was ahead of him and he ran to catch up. The vampire leaned over the parapet of the bridge and looked down on to the concrete below.

Xander heard him say, “Fuck” just as he caught up and he followed Spike’s gaze. A wail ripped from his throat.

Buffy hung in Drusilla’s arms, her head tilted to the side, her feet hardly touching the floor. One arm dangled at an odd angle and the halter top she wore was torn down at one side, revealing one white breast. A crowd of vampires stood to the side, hooting and clapping at the sight of the Slayer caught in Drusilla’s grasp. She had one hand wrapped in Buffy’s hair, the other slung across her collar bone. Xander could see Buffy struggling weakly, but it was obvious that the fight was long gone. Xander knew there was only one thing he could do.

Tearing his eye away from the scene below, he turned
and fixed his attention on the stone stairs at the end of the bridge that would take him down towards the river. Before he could move, Spike grabbed him, wrapping strong arms around his chest, holding him still. He struggled, trying desperately to break free, but Spike’s grip was unyielding. He screamed, “let me go, fucker,” and threw his weight to the side. But as he shifted, Spike released his grip and grabbed Xander by one shoulder, spinning him around. Xander staggered and Spike’s fist smashed into the side of his jaw, sending him crashing to the pavement. He was dimly aware of a ‘sorry, pet,’ and the sound of Spike’s boots pounding on the damp concrete in the direction of the stairs.

Xander lay on the ground, breathing hard and trying to focus. “Don’t you bloody well move,” floated back on the night air, and he saw the tail of Spike’s duster disappear around the corner of the stone stairway. Pushing himself to his knees, and then to his feet, he swayed as he fought for balance and staggered back to the parapet of the bridge. His hands gripped the edge of the stone, as if they would leave bruises on the granite when he let go. Down on the embankment below, Buffy had stopped struggling and Dru had her fangs deep in the defeated Slayer’s neck. He stared helplessly as the band of vampires watching her turned away, their attention now
focused on the bottom of the bridge. He saw white hair and the glimpse of a red shirt under black leather appear from the shadow of the stairway and the waiting crowd moved in front of Drusilla, facing Spike, a defensive line of worker bees defending their queen.

Tears pouring down his face, Xander watched as Spike spun and kicked and punched his way through the throng of minions, fighting his way through towards Drusilla. The vampires were cannon fodder, but they were doing their job well. Xander realised that Spike wouldn’t make it in time. From his vantage point high above the action, he saw Dru withdraw her fangs from Buffy’s neck and let go. The small body tumbled to the floor. Dru smiled up at him and with a flourish, threw an envelope down onto the hard, concrete walkway and turned away while Spike grappled with the last of the minions.

“Bitch,” Xander screamed and, not caring for his orders, started to run, intent on getting down off the bridge. He reached the top of the steps and half ran, half fell down until he reached the embankment level and headed back towards the river.

The sound of the water was the only thing Xander could hear when Spike came into view. He was alone, standing
over Buffy’s body, staring down. Xander could see his hands shaking, curling and uncurling on an unlit cigarette, until the mangled mess of crushed paper and tobacco fell to the ground, mingling with the ashes at his feet. The squealing sound of tires and the gunning of an engine told their own story. Then there was silence again. “She got away,” Spike said dully as Xander approached from behind. “She knew that I’d kill her. She knew I couldn’t catch her unawares, but once we were out in the open, all bets were off. She doesn’t normally work with an entourage. Doesn’t have the patience for it. But she knew, this time, she’d need a distraction.”

Xander had no words to reply. He knelt on the hard concrete and pulled Buffy’s head into his lap, carding his fingers through her hair. He remembered a sixteen year old girl lying in a pool of water and a sixteen year old boy who’d told the fates what they could do with their damn prophecy. Dashing a tear from his eye, he caught sight of the lighted dial of his watch. It was 2.03. Buffy was dead. He wished it had been him.
Part Fifteen

Xander didn’t register the passage of time between the South Bank and Bayswater. If questioned, he might have said that the journey was quicker because Spike didn’t bother about the niceties of road etiquette, like traffic lights and intersection signs. But Xander had more important things to think about than the quality of the driving. Buffy lay in his lap. He held her, feeling like she was the only thing holding him to the surface of the earth.

He was dimly aware of Spike cursing and the car lurched from side to side as Spike dodged god knows what obstacle. Xander focused on holding the small, limp body tightly, as if somehow, by keeping her safe from being hurt in death, he could start to atone for not being able to keep her alive.

The car stopped and there was the sound of a door opening and closing and Spike’s voice cut through the sudden silence. “Harris?” he said. Xander looked up. Reluctantly. Spike was standing by the open back door of the car. “Xander,” he said softly. “We’re back,” and
Xander realised that they were in the coach house, where Andrew had died only the day before. He knew Willow had strengthened the wards around the house, but the knowledge brought little comfort.

The thought of Willow made him hold Buffy’s body tighter. He was going to have to face his best friend and tell her that he’d failed. That he was pathetic, useless and dangerous to be around. It would have been better for everyone if she’d killed him on the bluff in Sunnydale, years before.

“Can’t sit there all night,” Spike said quietly. “The witch will be worried. She’s probably heard the car. She’ll be down to see what’s going on, if we don’t move it.”

Xander didn’t answer, but knowing Spike was right, he slowly maneuvered out of the back seat of the car until he was standing in the coach house, holding Buffy carefully. He had a momentary vision of holding Anya in the same position, the second time Buffy had died. But Anya had lived that time and they’d brought Buffy back. This time, there was nothing he could do but mourn his dead and hate himself even more.

The slow walk up the path contrasted with his previous
frantic flight from the kitchen, when Buffy had told him she’d found Andrew’s body. His stomach threatened to rebel for what seemed like the 100th time in the last week, when he realised that the heady scent of roses and lilies he used to love to inhale, now smelled more like the flowers on a funeral wreath.

Willow was waiting by the half open kitchen door. Back lit, she looked as small and fragile as the key he had bought for Dawn in Venice. As they approached, he saw her hand fly up to her mouth as if she was trying to stifle a scream.

“Oh god,” she whispered, her eyes fixed on the body in Xander’s arms. “Please no.”

“I’m sorry,” Xander said, catching a sob in his throat. “We were too late. We tried, but it was too late.”

The rain started again as he spoke and the sound of the water landing on the gravel seemed to give her focus. She pulled the door wider. “Get in here. It’s going to storm again.”

Xander followed her instructions, feeling almost as if he was in a trance, though he was aware of Spike at his
back, hovering, if a vampire could ever be said to do such a thing.

“You’re hurt,” she said, brushing her fingers across the slight swelling on his jaw.


She shook her head. “Not your fault. Neither of you.” She paused, taking a breath. “Come on, we’ll take her downstairs,” she said. “She'd want to be with the others.” Her voice cracked slightly and she cleared her throat and coughed before continuing. “She’d want to be with Dawn and Giles.”

Xander was beyond anything other than taking instructions. He followed Willow when she turned her back and left the kitchen through the office door. Spike fell in behind. His boots echoed on the stone flags. His steps, measured out the beat of their funeral procession as they approached the cellar and climbed slowly down the steps. The gloom of the underground room fled as
Willow flicked the switch on the light at the top of the stairs. Xander looked down and saw an empty room, with a worn cobbled floor and deep stone shelves built into the walls, which at one time had probably held wine, or other kitchen necessities. He knew it was a lie, a carefully constructed facade to keep away prying eyes, like those of policemen and younger slayers, who didn’t need to be faced with the reality of his family’s deaths. In that moment, Xander wished with all his heart that the scene was real. But he was a child of the Hellmouth and he knew that whatever his emotions were screaming at him, he wouldn’t utter the wish out loud.

He heard Willow mutter under her breath. The light flared and softened into a warm glow and a long wooden table became visible, covered with a scarlet wool blanket draped over three bodies.

Three empty vessels, Xander thought dully. Three dead bodies. He was carrying a fourth. “I’m sorry,” he whispered again. He approached the table and at a look from Willow, reluctantly put Buffy’s body down, smoothing her hair until it lay, fanned out, blonde against scarlet, white skin and blood.

He started when strong fingers gripped his elbow and
turned to see Spike standing at his side. “We need to disappear for a while. Let Willow tend to her, yeah?”

“What?” he said, not understanding why Spike would want to leave when they’d only just arrived. “We can’t leave. I can’t leave. Can’t leave her down here, in the cold and the dark.”

“Xander, please. It’s not cold and it’s not dark. I’m here, so she won’t be alone.” Willow’s eyes were bright with tears and he brushed his fingers across her cheek, mirroring her movement from earlier. One tear escaped and rolled down her face.

He stared at his shaking hand, damp with the evidence of her grief. “But that’s the reason, don’t you see? I can’t leave you down here with her. What if you never leave? What…” he faltered as the enormity of the situation crashed in on him.

“It’s okay. I’m right here. Just like I’ve always been. But Spike’s right, sweetie. You need to go up. Just for a little bit. Let me do this. I need to do this. I’ll come for you when I’m done. Okay?”

“Okay,” he said. His voice sounded hollow in the dead
space, in the space of the dead, and he allowed Spike’s grip on his elbow to guide him back up the stairs and through to the lounge, where the remains of a fire still burned in the grate.

Xander looked at the carriage clock on the small table by the door. The hands hovered half way between 2:30 and 2:35 and he sway ed when he realised that it had only been an hour since they’d set out on their mad, nocturnal dash across the city to save the first girl he’d ever fallen in love with. And he’d failed. He’d failed because he was stupid and weak and easy prey. Because he was cautious and wouldn’t take risks. The clock hands moved on. The ticking sounded like drumbeats in his ears. He remembered sitting at the crossing between Southampton Row and Kingsway, waiting for the lights to turn from amber to green, and he picked up the clock and hurled it with all his strength across the room, at the wall above the fireplace. It bounced once off the wall and caught the edge of the mantel, before tumbling down to rest on the hearth, just out of reach of the dying flames of the fire.

“Feel better for that?” Spike asked.

Xander stared at him. “Why couldn’t we save her? We
could have stopped her. We should have stopped her. Why didn’t we stop her?”

“We were never going to save her. The minute she decided to go off on her own, it was done. “

“But she said she wouldn’t go. We both said we wouldn’t go. What does that say, that she was willing to face her enemy while I sat here? While I fell asleep, for fucks sake! What does that tell you?” he yelled.

“It tells me she wasn’t thinking. She meant it when she said she wasn’t going to go. Meant it just fine, until she was sitting there, with her sis and the old man. Something cracked. We all do stupid things with grief. But the difference is, you were already running on empty. Have been for days. And your body did some thinking for you, for a while. The Slayer had a double kick in the gut, but I thought she’d be sensible, and I was wrong. Should have known better. She wasn’t thinking, and she was dead from the moment she left the house, she just didn’t know it.” Spike sighed. “There’s no bringing her back this time.”

Xander stared at the broken remains of the clock in the hearth. He walked slowly across the room as he
pondered Spike’s words. It felt as if he was wading through quicksand. Hunkering down, he fingered the shattered remains of the clock, running his thumb along the brass of the hands which were permanently stuck at 2.35. He pushed at the big hand experimentally and it moved creakily under the weight of his fingers. He was conscious of Spike watching him as he moved the hand round, pushing it anti clockwise, his own hands shaking all the time as he worked. “How far do I push it,” he whispered. “How far do I try to rewind? An hour, so that I could have driven faster across London? Not been so fucking cautious. Not obeyed the rules.” He pushed the hands further. “Or maybe two hours, so I wouldn’t have fallen asleep and could have stopped her before she left the house.”

“Xander,” Spike said cautiously and Xander turned round, still crouched in front of the fire, the mangled clock held in one hand.

“Maybe if I rewind it twenty four hours we could have caught Giles and Dawn coming out of the British Library. Or twenty six hours and stopped Andrew doing whatever he was doing in my car.” The fingers of his right hand gripped the brass hands of the clock, winding and winding and winding. His movements got quicker and
quicker. The sharp edge of the brass dug into his fingers until they started to bleed. “See,” he said. “Now we’ve saved Ginny and Maureen at Victoria. Now that honeymoon couple are tucked up safe in their bed. And now Elena’s collected Ilario from Gabriella’s and she’s still talking about him getting his hair cut.” His hand slowed as he pushed one more time. “See… see what I did,” he whispered, watching the blood dripping from his fingers onto the thick, dark hearth rug. “I just saved Rosanna.” The clock dropped from his nerveless fingers and he slumped forward until he was kneeling in front of Spike, looking up, not caring if he looked pathetic, because he could never look as pathetic as he felt. “It’s simple really. I can save them all. I just need to rewind the clock and it’s done.”

Spike hunkered down until they were face to face. “It’s not your fault. Keep telling you that. There’s nothing you could have done. You couldn’t have been quicker, or smarter, or anything. Wouldn’t have made any difference.”

“But…”

“No buts,” Spike said harshly. “You keep saying you don’t understand. There’s nothing to understand. That’s the
point. The rhyme is the only reason she needs. Don’t you see? It’s just an excuse. She wants you. That’s it. Nothing else. No grand plan. No deep meaning. Things are simple for Dru, even when they’re this complicated.”

“But why now?”

“Who knows? Told you; she saw you years ago. Saw you and liked what she saw. Then she forgot for a while. But she only ever forgets for a while. And she remembered and you’d grown up. But you’re still tilting at windmills. See, she doesn’t need a reason. She just needs a fancy and she’ll follow it until something brighter catches her eye.”

“She did all this just because she could?”

“Now you’re getting it. Why’d you think you’ve never been there for any of the deaths, apart from the Slayer’s, and you were meant to see that?”

Xander stared at him, incomprehendingly.

“I said she was grooming you. She’s wooing you too. Like a cat bringing in dead birds and laying them at your feet. The notes, the rhyme, it’s all part of the game. She
wanted you finding bodies. To make you feel helpless. And you do.” He curled his lip. “Learned her lessons well, did Dru.”

“So I’ll take myself out of the equation,” Xander replied softly. “She’s just going to keep going and going, as long as I’m alive. No one will be safe. Not the other slayers, not the man at the corner store. Not Willow.” He almost breathed her name. Just a whisper in the air, but the thought was uttered and couldn’t be recalled. “I couldn’t bear it. If she killed Willow, she could do what she liked with me. I wouldn’t care. But I can stop it happening. I kill myself and it stops.” Straightening his back, he took a deep breath as the practical solution took hold in his muddled mind. He glanced down at the pieces of the clock strewn across the rug. “I can’t rewind. But I can stop it going forward.”

“Xander Harris, don’t you dare!” Xander jerked at the harsh tone and saw Willow standing by the door, glaring at him. He struggled to his feet with Spike rising at his side.

“I don’t see any other way, Will. She’s not going to stop, but for some reason, god only knows why, she wants me. I’m dead and it stops.”
“No it doesn’t,” Spike countered. “It gets worse. You kill yourself and she’s going to raise hell. You think things are bad now, but this would only be the start. She’ll hunt everyone you’ve ever known. They’ll die. Slowly. Painfully. They’ll die and she’ll make sure they know that it’s your fault. Like I said, she wants you. She intends to have you. If she can’t, she’ll hurt you, any way she can. She’ll not stop. Not until everyone’s dead. Can you face that?"

“Then I go after her. Maybe I’d get lucky? Play the bait and get her while she’s gloating.”

“Not an option. You’d be like the Slayer. Get within one hundred yards of her and you’re already dead.”

“What if I kill her?” Willow said quietly. “That’s another option.”

“No it’s not.” Xander glanced sideways at Spike, but the vampire had his gaze fixed on Willow.

“Why not?” she demanded. “I’ve done it before.”

Spike shook his head. “That’s before. You’re not dealing
with an overgrown geek with a grudge here. Dru’s no slouch with the mojo. You think she’s not in your league, but she’s a seer and you’re not. Don’t you forget that. You really think you can beat her? She might be crazy by your standards, but it doesn’t make her any less dangerous. She’ll see you coming. In the end she’d get you.” He waved his hand at Xander, but his eyes were still on Willow. “You think he could stand that. He’s most of the way to a bloody nuthouse already. You want to finish the job?”

“Spike, stop.” Xander said quietly. He could hear the weariness in his voice and it seemed to suck the air out of the room.

Spike dropped his hand and sighed. “I’m done,” he said. Fumbling in his pocket, he hauled out a battered pack of cigarettes, pulled one out and stared at it for a moment as if he’d never seen a cigarette before. He glanced up at Xander and then over at Willow before walking over to the fireplace and bent down, throwing the unlit fag into the embers, watching it catch and smoulder. Picking up the shattered clock he ran his fingers along the edges of the brass hands. Xander watched, breathless, as Spike pushed one hand back and forth...back and forth... back and forth. After the third pass, the fingers stilled and
Spike dropped the remains of the clock onto the hearth rug and stood up, turning back to face them. Xander didn’t think he’d ever seen the vampire look so tired, in all the years he’d known him. “It’s a choice.” Spike said. “Stay here with the wards and protections. Wait for the headlines and the body count. Go after Dru and maybe get lucky, but most likely not. Or look at other options that she might predict, but she can’t do anything about. ‘Cause there’s only one option I can see. You’ll not like it, but I don’t think like comes into it anymore.”

“I’ll try anything now,” Xander replied. “Anything that won’t put anyone else in danger, because of me. But I don’t see what else there is?”

“I know Dru. Know how she thinks – in circles and spirals. That’s what makes you dizzy. Ever seen an Escher drawing?” he asked. Xander blinked at him and nodded, trying to catch the relevance. “Remember the way the perspective and logic twists and turns in your head when you try to work out which stairs are going up and which are going down. That’s the way Dru thinks. Think about a hand drawing a hand. Where does one start and the other one end? There’s only one way to stop her. Tear up the drawing. Change the rhythm of the rhyme.”
“But how do we do that?” Xander glanced from Spike to Willow and back again.

"It’s going to happen, one way or another. Only a matter of time. So, like I said, you have a choice. You can be passive and wait for Dru. Or you can take matters into your own hands and you come to me.”

“You want to turn him?” Willow asked, horrified.

“You got a better idea, and don’t go back to thinking about hunting Dru; you know it’s not going to work.”

“But how is it any different from suicide?” Xander asked, feeling like he was missing something important.

“Because I get what Dru wants. You’ll not be some weak human that she can play with and mould in her likeness. You get sired by a Master and everything that comes with it. She’ll hate it, but there’s not a damn thing she can do. Once you’re stronger, you'll get to spit in her eye.”

“Can I kill her?”

“No. Not yet. Not for a long time. One day, maybe? But
you’ll stop her fun for now. You do this and she’s lost the game. Angelus taught her well. It’s only worth playing when you know you’re winning. Do this and you reset the board. She’ll have no option but to stop.”

Xander looked at Spike for a moment, then walked over to the window, staring out at the dark and empty street before turning back round. “It’s funny,” he said. “Remember in Venice, you said that you wouldn’t me bite me, no matter how hungry you were? It was only a week ago.”

Spike shrugged. “A lot can change in a week. This isn’t about hunger. It’s about facing up to reality.”

“Yeah, I know.” Xander rubbed his hand over his eye patch, remembering how helpless he'd felt in Caleb’s grip. He’d felt more and more helpless as his friends died around him. But now, he actually had something to grab hold of that might help, however terrifying the consequence. He stared at the pieces of the clock on the hearth rug. He couldn’t rewind time and he couldn’t put the clock back together, but that was okay. Going back was impossible, but the future, it was there to be written. He had a brief memory of a roof top bar in Lisbon and Melina telling him never to lose hope. He’d
failed her, just like he’d failed her daughter, because he’d lost all hope. But now he’d found something to take its place. He’d been offered a solution and that was all that mattered. He raised his head and looked Spike in the eye. “You really think this will work? A minute ago you were talking me out of suicide. God knows I don’t want to die, but if that’s what it would have taken to make things stop then I’d have done it in a heartbeat. But you said that wouldn’t stop her. And now you’re saying that turning me will? At the risk of sounding like Spock, it’s... it’s not logical.

Spike snorted. “I never said Dru was logical. All the time we were together, she was always talking about patterns. She could look at the stars and tell me how they were all where they were meant to be. Where she wanted them to be. They were all part of the jigsaw she could see in her head. But if one piece was out of place, then the sky would fall. That’s what will happen if we do this. Her sky will fall.” He looked down at his feet and then back up at Xander. “Not much of an explanation, I know, but it’s the closest I can come to how she thinks.”

Xander looked out into the darkness and caught his breath at a movement just on the edge of the watery pool of light cast by the streetlamp. Pressing his hands
against the cold window pane, he shuddered when a city fox slunk out of the shadows and trotted across the road and into the darkness on the other side. He rested his forehead against the glass, counting to ten before he turned round and looked straight at Spike. “Okay,” he said, bracing himself for the fall out, which came only a heartbeat later.

“Xander, you can’t seriously think this will work?”

He forced himself to meet Willow’s glare and tried for a steady reply. “Like anything else has? If there was another solution, we’d have found it. Giles and Dawn with their big brains and their research would have found it. Buffy would have sorted it. Even Andrew might have come up with something bizarre that could have helped.” He looked at her, suddenly feeling sure of his decision. “I can’t risk you, Will. Please, don’t hate me for being weak.”

“You’re not weak. You’re anything but weak.”

“If I’d have been strong, Dru wouldn’t have come for me. She knew that it would be easy and it was. It is. But Spike’s right. If there’s a way to spit in her eye, then I’ll take it and I’ll live, or not, with the consequences.”
“But...”

“I’m trusting you, Wills. I’ll need you to be there after it’s done. I don’t want to hurt you, or any of the others. We’ll need an Orb.”

Xander watched as the implications of what he was asking sank in and then Willow turned to look at Spike suspiciously. “It’s all a bit convenient, isn’t it?”

“What’s that, witch?”

“Waiting until he’s at his lowest. All the other Scoobies are gone, Spike. All the ones who saw what you were. What you became and what you’ve become. All gone, apart from me and Xander. You know you can’t touch me, but Xander... Xander you can get to. Is that how it went? Working with your old girlfriend? Seeing how much fun you could have reliving your glory days? You always used to rant about what would happen when you got your chip out. Well that happened a while ago. You’ve got your shiny soul, but so did Ted Bundy. Have you been waiting all this time for revenge?”

“Willow, no.”
“That’s all right. She’s got a right to say her piece. Always knew there was a reason I liked you, witch. Almost as cynical as I am. Almost. If that’s the way I was going to play it, then yeah, it’s a thought. But I didn’t. Got no interest in these kinds of mind games. Never did really. Not since I was a fledge. My plans maybe don’t always work out, but they’re always straight forward. Get in. Make a killing. Get out. I don’t pull shite like this.”

He tipped an imaginary hat at Willow. “But yeah, thanks for the accusation. Nice to know you’re still thinking.”

Willow glared at Spike then turned back to Xander. “Xander, you can’t expect me to stand by and let you do this. I said I wouldn’t let you kill yourself and this is the same thing. It’s suicide by vampire, and -”

“Letting him go after Dru is suicide by vampire,” Spike interrupted. “Except she won’t let him die and she won’t give him a soul either. Sitting around here, doing nothing, while she continues the game, that’s suicide as well. You just put off the inevitable for a while. She’s out there and she will win. Bet you she’s looking at her cards, right now. Listening to the stars whisper in her ear. I know how she works. Keep telling you, I know her. She’ll
predict every move you make and counter it. She'll probably predict this one, but the difference is there’s not a damn thing she can do to stop it.”

“What about Faith and Robin?” Willow replied. “It won’t be long before they’re back. I know they’ve got stuff going on in South Africa. But if they knew...they’d come back. They’d help. We just need to hang on a bit longer.”

Xander shook his head. “I can’t, Will. Buffy’s gone. Giles is gone. What happens when Faith and Robin come back? Do we wait for Dru to add more numbers to her rhyme? Or maybe make up a new one? I can’t wait. I’ve waited long enough.”

“But...”

“We've run out of 'buts' Willow. I don’t want to die. But I won’t be the cause of any more deaths. I can’t. I’d kill myself first, but you won’t let me and I love that you feel like that. And this way I still get to be here. I still get to see you and help you and fight for you.”

“But not like this. We’ve got weapons and resources. We can fight, even if we don’t wait for reinforcements. She’s just one enemy. We’ve stopped apocalypses, we can stop
“One vampire.”

Spike lit a cigarette and took a long puff. “Easy to say when you’re the general and not one of the troops, witch. How many slayers are you going to send after her? Two? Four? Half a dozen? How long can you keep burying the dead, until they won’t go out any more? How long until they gang up and push him out the door and leave him to fend for himself? Remember the way they were with the First? The way they turned on Buffy, the minute they’d been pushed too far? They were only potentials then, clutching at the coat tails of power. Now they’re all souped up, but it doesn’t make them any less human. They’re still teenage girls. They don’t want to die. Sooner or later there’ll be a mutiny and you know who’ll be walking the plank.”

“Stop it!” Xander yelled. He left his post by the window and stood between Spike and Willow, in front of the fireplace. “Stop it,” he repeated quietly. “Please.”

Spike sighed and nodded. “Look, Willow. I’ve got no agenda. I don’t like it anymore than you do. If you’d told me a week ago I’d be offering to turn Xander Harris, I have been calling for the men in white coats. But we’re out of options. I’ll keep him safe. Promise. You fix on the
soul and it’ll be fine.”

“It’ll not be fine,” she replied. “It’ll never be fine.”

Spike took another puff of his cigarette. “I know,” he said. “But it’s all we’ve got.”

Xander took a deep breath and held Willow’s gaze, then Spike’s. “Cellar,” he said softly. "I want to do it in the cellar. I need to see them. I need them to know, to understand. Please?’’

“Xander…”

“Please, Will?” he pleaded and she nodded, no longer having anything else to say.

“Okay.”

Xander bent down and carefully gathered the shattered remains of the clock off the hearth rug and placed them on the mantelpiece. The jewel box with Dawn’s present still sat where he’d placed it for safe keeping when Yapp had visited earlier. He ran his finger over the velvet covering, before scooping it up in one hand. He glanced at Spike and touched Willow’s shoulder as he walked by.
He didn’t look back, trusting that they would follow.

The cellar was as gloomy as always when he snapped on the light, but he heard Willow whisper at his back and, as before, the light crackled and softened and the long table, now bearing four bodies draped in wool, lay in front of him.

Reaching the bottom step he paused, taking in the scene, then walked to the head of the table. He pulled back the cloth, uncovering his dead. Andrew lay at the end, like he was sleeping, the small wound at his neck almost invisible. Looking more relaxed than Xander could ever remember him looking in life. Dawn lay next to him, so grown up and so beautiful. It made his heart ache for the friendship and the family lost. Xander wondered briefly about her power, her keyness; whether it had helped Dru in her battle with Buffy. It would be the final insult if somehow the girl that Buffy was willing to end the world to protect, had been the foundation of her own downfall. He gently pulled her right hand open, placing the jewel box in her palm, then closed her fingers around it.

Buffy was next. As was fitting, she lay between Dawn and Giles and Xander turned his head briefly, acknowledging Willow over his shoulder, for this mark of respect. ‘The
Slayer’, he thought. Not a slayer, not a baby slayer, as they so often disparaging called them for want of a collective noun. She was The Slayer. She’d died for the third and final time and deserved her rest. He stroked his fingers gently through her hair, then moved on, focusing on Giles. He felt his breath catch. Giles who had been stuffy and difficult at the start of their acquaintance and wasn’t that a British word for how they had begun? But their relationship had grown and blossomed, and the man Giles had been, had recognised the man Xander had become. There had been love and trust and respect, as well as jokes and fear and frequent exasperation, but that was fine. That was part of having a friend. And Giles had been his friend. No one deserved an ignominious death and Xander knew that if he did nothing else, he would stop Dru’s plan by whatever means necessary, because he needed to make Giles’ death mean something. He hoped Giles would approve.

Straightening his shoulders, Xander turned and looked back at Spike, standing at the bottom of the steps, Willow at his side. “So how do we do this?” he asked.

Xander heard Willow make a small whimper of distress at Spike’s bald statement, but it was right to have it laid out. To make it real. “I guess not, when you put it like that,” he said with the ghost of a smile.

“Xander, this isn’t necessary. We’ll find another way. There has to be another way.”

“There’s no other way, Will. I can’t let her continue and Spike’s right. This will stop her. Then we’re safe.”

Shaking her head, she crossed the few feet of the cobbled cellar floor that separated them, laid both hands against his chest and looked up at him. “Don’t do this to keep me safe, please.”

He took both her hands in one of his. “Remember on the bluff, I told you that I loved you no matter what? I’d do anything to keep you safe. I’d do anything to make up for the deaths of the people I loved, but I can’t bring them back. But I can stop this craziness from hurting anyone else. I know I’m hurting you. That’s the last thing I want, but I don’t know what else to do, Will. Please understand?” he pleaded.
“I do understand. I do. But I hate it. I should be able to do something to fix it.”

“You’re here and you’re safe. That’s enough. Love you, Will.”

“Love you too. Always.”

Xander looked over her shoulder at Spike, standing behind the table, his hand resting lightly just behind Buffy’s head. He half expected the vampire to make some sarcastic comment about the level of sentiment, but Spike held Xander’s gaze briefly, then nodded and looked away.

Xander pulled reluctantly out of Willow’s embrace and kissed her lightly on the forehead. “Go to bed. I’m just going to go to sleep for a while. Spike will call you when it’s time. We have got an Orb, right?”

She laughed shakily. “Yes, I have an Orb, but if you think I’m going to bed now, you’re even crazier than I thought. I’m staying here. There’s not one thing you can say to make me go.”

“Willow!”
“Not one thing, mister. Deal with it!”

Knowing he was beaten and that arguing would only draw things out, he kissed her again and looked up at Spike. “Okay, so I guess we should get on with it. No point in putting it off.”

‘Right.” Spike left his spot by Buffy and walked back to the bottom of the stairs. “Sit here,” he said, indicating the third from bottom step. Might as well get as comfy as you can in this place. I’ll sit behind. Gives me a better angle if I’m slightly higher.”

Xander nodded and sat where he was directed. Spike slid in behind him on the next step up. Willow sat on the bottom step, her arms wrapped around Xander’s lower legs, her chin resting on his knees. She gave him a watery smile and he knew the one he gave in return was just as weak. He focused on the many colours of red in her hair, the green of her eyes, and the paleness of her skin, and was astonished to discover that here, at the tipping point, the fear and anger and pain melted away, leaving only grief and sadness and the surety that this was the only choice he could make to keep her safe.
He looked at the bodies, clad in scarlet. People he’d lost because of things he couldn’t control. But this was his decision. For the first time since the last night in Lisbon, he felt at peace.

“Which side?” Spike’s question cut though his reverie. “Left or right?”

“Right,” he said decisively. “I want to see you coming.”

“Right it is.”

Xander half expected Willow to make a final attempt to talk him out of it, or for Spike to give him a last chance to back out. For a heartbeat he held his breath, waiting for the argument, but then he saw a flash of white hair out of the corner of his eye and a feeling of exquisite pain blossoming at his throat as Spike sank his fangs slowly into his flesh and started to feed.

He kept his eye fixed on Willow, wishing he could wipe away the tears rolling down her face, until his vision started to fade and a feeling of extreme lethargy seemed to invade every muscle and bone.

His head lolled back and a voice whispered somewhere in
the darkness. “Drink now.” The taste of something hot and coppery oozed across his tongue. For an instant Scooby instinct took over and he fought the sensation. But strong hands held him from behind, and gentle arms cradled him from the front, and he drank and felt consciousness slide away, until there was nothing but void.

It was 3.02. Willow and Spike sat on the cellar steps, watched over by the silent tableau of their dead and waited for Xander Harris to be reborn.

Somewhere across the city, Drusilla screamed.

The End

Interlude: Fledging

Series: Magpie
Fandom: BTVS
Characters: Gabriella, Spike
Rating: nothing to be worried about
Warnings: Shameless baiting of an original character
Disclaimer: Joss and Mutant Enemy et al own all. I own nothing.
It was too early for the café to be really busy. The lunchtime crowd was mostly gone and the early dinner crowd was still at work. That just left the few intrepid tourists who’d braved the wet, November Florentine weather and were looking for some shelter, and perhaps a little sustenance after a day spent wandering the enticing halls of the Uffezi.

For all that, the standing area of the Café Gilli was still bustling. Gabriella rested her elbows on the bar and took a tentative sip of her espresso. It was hot and bitter and tasted like the argument she’d had with Arturo the night before. She curled her lip. Men! They were good for one thing and Arturo hadn’t been very good at that, despite his reputation. Closing her eyes, she relived the moment
she’d told him that she’d had better sex the night she lost her virginity to the gardener’s boy, when she was sixteen, than she’d had in the whole four weeks she and Arturo had been, what could only be loosely called, ‘dating’. It had been a sweet moment and she mourned the fact that she didn’t have the money to buy a celebratory pastry to go with her coffee. Single and proud of it was going to be her new mantra, she promised herself, and took another sip of her espresso. It was a new decade. She swore that the Seventies would be lived on her terms.

Her reverie on the uselessness of men in general, and Italian men in particular, was interrupted by the sound of raised voices coming from the seated part of the café. She tried to ignore them, but her natural curiosity finally got the better of her and she turned around to discover the reason for the commotion.

One of the waiters was arguing with a customer, who was seated with his back to her. A member of the Gilli staff arguing with a paying client was rare enough to intrigue her further. Straining her ears she could hear random words coming from both the waiter and the customer – ‘table’, ‘extra’, ‘bar’ and ‘price’ were followed by ‘bullshit’ and ‘get lost’ and a valedictory ‘bugger off’
said in a semi-cultured English voice that, from her summer sojourn in England, she identified as coming from somewhere in the South, possibly London, but she couldn’t be sure. She loved to solve puzzles, especially crossword puzzles, and when she put the words together in her head and added the accent of the stranger, she realised the nature of the problem. She smiled to herself. Here was an opportunity to show that a woman could help the poor benighted man, who obviously had no idea what the rules were in the Gilli.

Decision made, she picked up her bag from the bar and threaded her way through the tables, circling around until she was standing in front of the tourist’s table. The man in question, having sent the waiter off in a huff, was now reading a novel - a Penguin Classic version of Gulliver’s Travels. He seemed to be engrossed and she stood, wondering whether to walk away, before giving herself a mental kick. “Excuse me,” she said. “I hope you don’t mind me intruding?”

He raised his head and Gabriella gazed into blue eyes that look up at her appraisingly. His mouth quirked and he tilted his head and smiled. “You can intrude on me any time you like...”
She flushed, reminding herself that she was an emancipated, strong minded woman and she wasn’t going to be beguiled by an Englishman, no matter how engaging his smile. “I heard you, perhaps I could call it debating, with the waiter, about the cost of your coffee. You might not know that it’s customary to pay more if you sit at a table, rather than standing at the bar?” She gestured over his shoulder, back towards the bar, noticing with a frown that someone had already slid into her space and that her half drunk coffee was nowhere to be seen. She let her hand drop back down onto the top of her bag and was perturbed to notice that the stranger was smirking. Yes, smirking was definitely the word that sprang into her mind.

“I know,” he said. “I just don’t like the sharp practice, that’s all. It seems to me that a customer who’s all settled in a comfy chair is more likely to spend more than someone who’s standing up, so the whole thing just annoys me.”

She raised her eyebrows and was disconcerted when he raised his own right back. “So you were just complaining to make a point?”

“More or less...” He paused, before picking up the
bookmark that had been sitting on the table in front of him, and placing it carefully in the open book. “You know, I’m getting a crick in my neck looking up at you. Would you like to sit down?”

“I’ve paid for a coffee at the bar.” She wasn’t going to admit that both her coffee and her spot had disappeared, but from the quizzical expression on his face, she had the feeling that he might just know.

“And I’ve paid over the odds for this table. So I’m guessing that evens things out, don’t you think?”

She stalled for time, suddenly feeling a lot less sure of herself than she had just a few minutes before. “I don’t know?” she said. “And I don’t know you,” she continued more firmly.

“Sure you do. Come on, live a little. I don’t bite.”

“I’m not entirely convinced about that,” she replied, gripping her bag just a little tighter. “A gentleman would introduce himself before he invited a lady to join him.”

“I never said I was a gentleman, but since I think you’re almost certainly a lady, I guess I’ll follow the etiquette.”
He stood and bowed in a way that Gabriella could only have described as courtly, if words like courtly were still in fashion. “William – you can call me Will.”

Despite her sudden trepidation, she straightened her back and responded in kind. “Gabriella,” she said. “You can call me Gabriella.”

He grinned, nodding as if he approved of her reply and sat down again. “Wouldn’t dream of calling you anything else. Now, that coffee you ordered at the bar is probably cold. Why don’t I whistle up another for you and I’ll get one of the same. I think I’ve gone off this one,” he said, with a nod towards the half drunk coffee in front of him. “It’s not like they can charge me for the table twice.”

“Well...”

“Just let them try, that’s all I’ve got to say.” His fingers drummed on the cover of his book. “Please, join me. I’m beginning to get bored with Lilliputians.” The smile came again and she got the feeling he wasn’t necessarily talking about fictional characters. She acknowledged inwardly, that the thought appealed to her vanity. With a nod, she pulled out a chair and sat down, relieved that he hadn’t tried to pull it out for her.
William...Will, she corrected herself, motioned to a waiter and smiled at Gabriella. “What will you have? My treat, of course, since you’re saving me from boredom.”

“I’ll have a cappuccino,” she replied, all of a sudden in the mood for something a little frothier than her previous, Arturo flavoured espresso.

“Make that two,” he instructed the waiter. “I’m thinking I might also indulge in something a little sweet. What do you suggest?” he said, and she realised that he was asking her and not the waiter.

“Schiacciata alla fiorentina,” she replied decisively with a glance up at the waiter. She noticed without surprise that he wasn’t the one Will had had the argument with earlier. The waiter nodded to them both and bustled off.

“You going to tell me what you’ve ordered, or is it a surprise?”

“Do you like surprises?” She was surprised to hear a teasing tone in her voice and wondered, momentarily, what it was about the strange Englishman that made her feel so relaxed and somehow daring.
“Sometimes,” he replied with a ghost of a smile. “Depends really on who’s doing the surprising.”

“Well I hope you will enjoy this one. I’ve ordered what you would call Florentine Sponge Cake. It’s a speciality around Carneval time in February, but I feel like a little celebration today and since you said it was your treat...”

“So I did.” The smile was back in full force now. She had to admit that it would take a very strong minded woman, not to be just a little charmed by such a smile. “So, are you going to tell me what you’re celebrating?”

She toyed with telling him that it was none of his business, but considering she’d raised the subject and he’d bought her coffee and cake, she concluded that, in this instance, playfulness could easily teeter over into rudeness. “Where to begin!” she replied with her own smile, that she knew from compliments past was one of her many best features. “Breaking up with my dolt of a boyfriend. Passing my exams. Enjoying the city without the tourists,” she paused, “present company excepted. There’s always a reason to celebrate something.”

“A girl after my own heart.”
A few dozen responses jumped into her head, but Gabriella held her tongue as the returning waiter put down the requested coffee and pieces of cake, and spent what seemed like an endless amount of time fussily arranging the plates, cups and napkins. Finally he left and she took a fortifying sip of her cappuccino before looking at Will over the rim of her cup. “You don’t know anything about me.”

He echoed her movement, sipping at his coffee, before placing it carefully back in front of him and leaning forward, his elbows on the table. All of a sudden the space between them seemed to disappear, in a way that she was sure, had very little to do with his physical closeness. “Sure I do. You’re at university here, but you’re not from here. You’ve been in London for a while, but not this year.”

“How...”

“Your dress is Biba,’ he continued, not giving her time to finish her question. “My ex had one just like it, but in scarlet. Wore it until it fell off her back. But that was last year and fashion doesn’t stick around that long, that they’d still be producing the same style now. Your hair is
very Vidal Sassoon. Makeup is probably Mary Quant. It suits you, but don’t make the mistake of trying to keep it like that for long. It will date quickly.”

“You’re very opinionated about fashion. It’s unusual in an Englishman.”

He shrugged. “I’ve seen styles come and go. The good ones always resurface, but unfortunately, a few of the naff ones raise their ugly heads again too. It’s as if every generation likes to dig up the previous one’s mistakes.”

“So you don’t think it’s healthy for people to make mistakes,” she questioned, frowning at the thought. ‘Not even if they come by them honestly?’

“Oh, I’m all for mistakes.” He paused and took a delicate bite of the sponge cake, munching slowly, an expression of obvious enjoyment on his face. “This is really good. See, it could have been a big mistake letting you order the goodies, but it wasn’t, so that a point in the plus column. You could as easily have ordered something nasty, just to see the poor Englishman suffer. On the other hand, I’m pretty good at reading people and I didn’t think you would. But most people make mistakes all the time. Wouldn’t be half as much fun, if people
weren’t a little stupid sometimes.”

“I’m not sure I like your view of human nature. It seems very…” She trailed off, groping for the right word.

“Cynical?” he supplied. “Jaded...been there, done that?”

She tamped down an automatic reaction to refute his gentle accusation, realising that those were exactly the words that had been in her mind. “Alright, all of those things. It just surprises me that you’re so detached, when you don’t look much older than me.”

“Looks can be deceiving, Gabriella. I’ve been around. I’ve seen people do great things and I’ve seen people do awful things. I’ve always thought the human race is like one of those Matryoshka dolls. You keep opening up one layer after another and there’s another doll underneath. But one of these days, you get to the final one, and it’s tiny and there’s nothing left inside – all that’s there is a little, wooden doll.

“I feel I should be reading some great philosophical meaning into that,” she said.

“Not really. I’ve got family who would spin it into
something deep and meaningful, but that’s the Irish for you - always looking for the meaning of life, usually at the bottom of a glass. Me? Sometimes I just like the sound of my own voice.” He took another bite of the cake, followed by a sip of coffee. “We were talking about mistakes. Usually the most interesting things come about because of an intention that’s just gone slightly awry. That’s where legacies start. That’s where history is usually made. The artists and writers who ate, and drank, and argued in this café, hoped they’d leave something behind. Something that others would talk about and learn from. Or maybe just shake their head in wonder at the sheer madness, stupidity or sometimes genius. Imagine Marinetti and Soffici arguing about the future of art, right here where we’re sitting. That’s how history’s made and that’s how we shape the present.”

As he talked, she found herself leaning forward, as if proximity could better capture his words, until she too had her elbows on the table and her chin propped on the backs of her hands. She couldn’t remember a time she’d been so intrigued. “You’re very passionate for an Englishman,” she said, feeling almost giddy with her own daring. “You make it sound as if you were right there in the room with them. It’s a more interesting perspective than most of the lectures I’ve been to. You’ve got a gift
for words, though I wonder which side you would have been on in those arguments? Are you a Futurist, or do you think those ideas are an abomination?”

She was surprised at his sudden burst of laughter. “Not really. Not according to some folk. But yeah, I like history. I like words and I’m interested in people. Sometimes it’s fun to put them all together. Get under the skin of folk. Understand what gets their blood pumping. Get a real taste for what they think and feel and believe.” He tilted his head and she had the strangest feeling that he was looking through her, but then he slumped back in his seat with a sigh and the moment was gone. “As for Futurism? You’ve got to admit there’s something very enticing about a movement that celebrates speed and violence, youth and machinery. Sitting here, in all this elegance, you’ve got to admire the irony.”

“That’s something the English do very well – irony. It can be a little confusing at first.”

“That’s true. You should see the Americans trying to work out if you’re joking when you say it’s lovely weather, when it’s actually raining cats and dogs. They get this strained little smile, like they want to be polite and agree, but at the same time are desperate to
contradict you.”

Realising that the intimacy of before was gone, she also sat back in her chair, her elbows now well clear of the table, just like her mother and grandmother had taught her when she was small. “Well, when it comes to rain, I suppose they think that the English are an authority?”

“Spoken like a girl who’s spent some time there, though I’ve already been through that with the look you’re working. But you’ve been there for longer than a shopping expedition, yeah?”

She nodded. “I spent a sabbatical there last summer, working for a Foundation that my father is connected with. It has a main office in London and a retreat in Devon, so I got to enjoy both the country and the city. It was quite the experience and I learned a lot.”

“So, are you going to follow in daddy’s footsteps?”

“It’s expected. But I have some time before I go down that road.”

“And that’s why you’re here in Florence,” he said, a knowing tone in his voice. “Kicking over the traces a bit,
before you settle into a life in harness. I can understand that. What did the family think of you spreading your wings, if you don’t mind me mixing my metaphors?”

She could feel a blush spreading across her face and she wondered again how he was so perceptive. It really wasn’t comfortable. “No, I think it is fair to say that they were not happy. They wanted me to stay in Venice and study there. Then I could have lived at home.”

“And they could have kept an eye on you. Protected you from dolt-like boyfriends and impetuous Englishman who might tempt you with coffee and cake.”

“Possibly,” she admitted. “But I prefer not to be protected, so there was nothing to be done. Stubbornness is a family characteristic, but one that the family objects to having turned back on itself. So, here I am in Florence and I’ll be here for another two years.”

“I’m sure Florence is delighted to have you.”

She frowned, looking for the salacious connotation that she was almost sure was behind the comment. It certainly would have been if Arturo had made it, but Will just smiled and finished the last crumbs of his cake and
she was forced to conclude that some things obviously didn’t translate between cultures.

She pulled herself out of her thoughts and was startled to find that he was on his feet and was pulling some cash out of his wallet. He dropped it on the table and she was tempted to tell him that the etiquette was to give the money to the waiter, including a hefty tip. But remembering the way their encounter had started, she decided that her advice wouldn’t be welcome. He tucked his wallet back into the inside pocket of his jacket and smiled down at her. “Well, this has been pleasant, but I’ve got to be going.”

“Oh.” She was surprised at how disappointed she felt. So much for the emancipated woman she thought, entranced by a pair of blue eyes, a silver tongue and a mind that actually worked.

He pushed back his chair with one foot and moved round the table until he was standing at her side. “It’s been a pleasure, Gabriella. I’m sorry we couldn’t get better acquainted. This brief taste has been delightful.”

“Will you be back in Florence?” She hated how hopeful she sounded.
“Perhaps, someday. But I suspect not while you’re still studying. But who knows, maybe I’ll catch up with you in Venice one day.”

“But you won’t know where to look.” That’s it, she told herself, sound playful and teasing, but not needy. Never needy.

“Don’t worry, I’ll find you if I’m there. I never forget a face.”

He looked down at her and, for an instant, she wished that she had a camera, or a photographic memory, so that she could always recall the exact colour of his eyes. Then she kicked herself for thinking like a love-struck teen and pulled herself together. “You never told me your last name,” she said lightly. “I can’t tell the housekeeper to look out for random Englishmen called Will.”

“It’s an old family name. Aurelius, William Aurelius.”

“That’s a very grand name. At least your father settled on William instead of Marcus,” she said with a smile.
“Not really one for the classics, my dad. Even with William, it’s still a bit of a mouthful. That’s why most people call me Spike.”

He bowed, just as he’d done at their introduction, and again she was struck by the elegant, old fashioned movement, so at odds with the rest of his attitude. As he straightened up, he took hold of her right hand and placed a chaste kiss on her fingertips before letting go. “It really has been a pleasure, Gabriella,” he said.

Before she could say anything in reply, he turned and strode off, not looking back.

She stared at her hand, resting innocuously on the table, then back up to see if he was still in sight. But the Gilli was bereft of mysterious Englishman. Grasping her coffee cup, she took a fortifying drink, and his last words echoed in her head. “Most people call me Spike.” Her hand started to shake, her grip slackened and the coffee cup tumbled to the floor, shattering on the terracotta tiles. She bent down to pick up the shards and a sharp edge of porcelain sliced across the top of the middle finger that he’d kissed. Hissing, she jerked her hand back and straightened, watching, hypnotised, as a few drops of blood dripped sluggishly on to the copy of Gulliver’s
Travels he’d left on the table.

She’d never felt more like a Lilliputian in her life.

The End

Mockingbird

by

Sparrow2000

Fandom: BTVS
Characters: Xander/Spike (eventually), Willow, OC’s
Rating: PG overall
Warnings: Angst and character death in later chapters
Disclaimer: Joss and Mutant Enemy et al own everything. I own nothing
Summary: Xander is still coming to terms with the events in Magpie, but forces outside his control seem disinclined to leave him alone. Note to the unwary: If you haven’t read Magpie, which is an Xander, Spike non-slash story, Mockingbird probably won’t make much sense.
Beta extraordinaire: ♀thismaz Thank you my dear, for all your thoughts and insights, your patience and your love. This story is so
Mockingbird is dedicated to twilightofmagic. I swore I wasn’t going to write a sequel to Magpie, but her comments about the tantalizing possibilities wormed their way into my head and started to gnaw at my brain.

Part One

The rustle of the leaves, their colours still vibrant with the memory of autumn, sounded strangely loud in the still of the early evening. They carpeted the narrow, winding path between the gravestones and crunched under foot, a reminder that the early winter frosts had begun. The almost full moon made the lichen on the old stone of the Victorian tombs gleam, as if someone had dipped them in silver, the patterns of the moss spider-webbed across marble, like the tracery on the antique silver tea pot that still sat in the library, untouched and unused. A soft wind whispered through the shadows cast by almost bare trees, and the sounds of birds coming home to roost on the tops of nearby rooftops, and chapels, and crypts, played counterpoint to the fine breath of air. They sounded remote. Unreal. Almost ghostly. If you believed in ghosts.

Xander believed in ghosts.
Standing in front of the door of the old mausoleum, he ran his hand down one of the cracked marble columns standing sentinel by the doorway. He slowed the movement, then stopped, before rubbing gently up and down across the stone, measuring its solidity, weighing its fitness for the task of bearing the weight of the tomb.

“It’s not going to fall, you know,” a soft voice murmured at his back. “It didn’t fall when you did that last week, or last month, or all the months before that. Victorian engineering; we knew how to build things to last.”

Xander’s hand stilled, his fingers splayed on the cracked stone. “I know,” he said. “Can’t seem to help myself.”

“We’ve all got our strange habits. Rituals maybe. It’s just one of yours. Are you going in?”

Xander smiled but didn’t turn around. “Don’t I always?”

“Yes. But you’ve always been a contrary git, so I keep expecting you do something unexpected.”
“I’ll remember that. So the more I do the expected, the crazier it’ll drive you, because you’re expecting me to do something unexpected.” He studied the way the pale skin of his fingers blended with the old white stone, then looked back over his shoulder. “Of course, now you’re expecting me to do what you expected, simply because it’s not what you’d normally expect. So maybe I’ll do something unexpected just to be difficult.”

“Now you’re giving me a headache.”

The smile threatened to become a grin, but couldn’t quite make the leap. “You weren’t expecting that now, were you?”

“So are you going in?”

“That obvious, huh?”

“Only if you’ve seen it a couple of dozen times before. You do the whole procrastination routine every time we come. It’s just a surprise to see what form it’ll take. So yeah, you could that say ‘that obvious’.”
Xander chuckled, but there was no mirth in the sound. He rubbed his hand against the stone pillar again, wondering fleetingly if vampires could develop OCD. A smaller, white hand laid itself on top of his own, pressing it gently against the stone, forcing it to stop. “It’s not going to fall. They’re safe here. Nothing’s going to hurt them.”

He wanted to agree, to believe, but a shudder travelled through his body and he rode out the sensation, before pushing himself off the pillar, forcing Spike’s hand away. Spike allowed himself to be pushed and Xander acknowledged inwardly that the word to underline was ‘allowed’. He knew that he may not always like his Sire, or even agree with him half the time, but they understood each other in ways that neither of them was ready to admit.

“Do you have it?” Xander asked.

Spike fished in the pocket of his duster and hauled out an ornate iron key. “One of these days you’re going to ask, and I’m going to say no.”

“Do you think I’d believe you?”
“Probably not, but who knows, I might do it just for the hell of it.”

“Just to be unexpected,” Xander replied with a hint of a smile on his face.

“Yeah,” Spike said gruffly. “Something like that.” He paused, turning the key over his hand, like he was weighing its import, before holding it out for Xander to take. “Come on, let’s get this done. The Witch will be worried if we take too long.”

Xander accepted the key and turned back to the weather-beaten wooden door, placing the key carefully in the large rusting iron lock. Despite its appearance the lock was well oiled and the key turned easily. The door swung open at one gentle push. Stooping, he picked up a bouquet of lilies he’d laid on the ground by the door and stepped over the threshold, into the gloom, his eyes fixed on the back wall. Spike followed behind, pausing briefly to light the candle sitting in the recess just inside the door.

The flame danced in the current from the night breeze, lighting the inside of the tomb with a soft light, illuminating the rows and rows of white marble
plaques engraved with names and dates. The ones at the top were dark with the grime of ages, their legends hardly readable anymore. Xander could feel Spike watching him as he stood in front of the wall, and there was a strange comfort in the knowledge that Spike was there. Placing the flowers on the ground at his feet, Xander knelt in front of the bottom row of plaques. They shone, marble white and ghostly in the candlelight. The names carved there were sharp and crisp – Buffy Summers, Dawn Summers, Rupert Giles, Andrew Wells.

Xander traced his finger across each of the names, starting with Andrew, lingering over Giles and then Dawn, before coming to rest over Buffy’s name. His finger traced each letter in her name and then followed the grooves of the date she was born and the date she died. The date she died. Shaking slightly, he turned his head and looked back at Spike. “Will it ever get better?”

“One of these days, yeah. It’ll get better.”

“You say that every time I ask. Every time we come. You say the same thing.”
“I know. I’ll keep saying it until you believe it. Or until you stop asking.”

“Aren’t they the same thing?” Xander asked softly, glancing back at his finger still resting against Buffy’s plaque.”

“Nope. You might stop asking, because you’ve given up thinking I can give you an answer you can believe in. That’s not the same thing as believing that it’s true.”

“Do you think I’ll get to that stage? Do you think I can get beyond it?”

“Only you can answer that one. They’re all gone, but they’d want you to believe. The Slayer, the Watcher, Bit, even Geek Boy, they’d want you to believe, but only you can make it happen. It’s up to you. Tell you that, every time we have this conversation.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

There seemed nothing else to say and Xander turned his attention to the lilies he’d laid down at his side.
Removing the dead flowers from the vase on the floor, he replaced them, one stem at a time with the fresh ones. He knew they would be dead in a few days, in this room without light, but the gesture was important. To bring life into this dead place, just for a little while. It was the only life he had to offer.

The flowers arranged to his satisfaction, he rose creakily to his feet, the dead flowers bunched in one hand and glanced back at Spike. “Thank you.”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “For what?”

“For putting up with me.”

“Don’t do it for you. Do it for the witch. She’s the size of nothing and my duster’s heavier, but she still scares the bejesus out of me.”

“You and me both, bleach boy.”

Xander crossed the few feet back to the door of the tomb and paused next to Spike.”Come on. A grumpy Willow wouldn’t be of the good. We should get back. “

Spike nodded and pinched out the flame of the candle,
following Xander into the winter night.

An owl hooted in the darkness and Xander shivered as he remembered another owl, high above the clutter of buildings in the Alfama in Lisbon, the night he’d discovered Rosanna’s body. He felt a hand on his shoulder, squeezing lightly and turned back to look at Spike. Spike’s skin was alabaster under the light of the early winter moon. Xander wondered if he looked like that, then shook his head at his own foolishness. Beauty was for Buffy and Dawn and Willow and now he could admit it, for Spike. A different kind of beauty, perhaps, but breathtaking nevertheless, in its own way. He shook off Spike’s hand and strode towards the entrance of the cemetery, the dead flowers clutched in one hand.

Beauty was something for others. Not for him.

Not anymore.
Part Two

The light was on in the kitchen when Spike and Xander made their way up the path from the coach house that did service as a garage. Xander hated the walk. He knew it was foolish. The path, and the herbs, and the barren, winter stems of the wild roses and honeysuckle weren’t to blame for the recurring memories of running headlong into the rain to find Andrew’s body, carefully arranged in the front seat of his car. They weren’t to blame for the memory of carrying Buffy, her body so light, so fragile, knowing that she’d never live to fight another day. That he’d really got her killed, and there was nothing he could do to bring her back.

Pausing at the bend in the path, listening to the crunch of gravel under Spike's foot, his fingers trailing through the brittle stalks of lavender that had been allowed to grow wild, untended through the long year of grief, he watched Willow moving in and out of the frame of the lit, kitchen window. It was such a normal scene, so serene, so unexceptional and Xander clenched his fingers, bruising the fragrant petals under his hand before he stepped forward, opened the kitchen door and crossed over into the light.

Willow looked up from the counter and smiled. “Do
you want some tea?” she asked, but as she spoke she was already reaching for the kettle and running the cold water on the kitchen tap.

“Sure, why not.” Xander replied, dropping down into one of the high backed chairs at the kitchen table. Spike shrugged out of his duster and grabbed a glass and the half empty bottle of whisky from the shelf by the door.

Willow busied herself with cups, sugar and the other accoutrements that made up a proper tea tray. Xander couldn’t help but smile at the way she’d had taken to the Gilesian rituals that they had mocked so gently when they were kids. But watching her, her hand hovering over the small ornate tea caddies, filled with myriad different flavours and smells, he felt that it was right to see her taking on the mantle of carer, as well as Council head from Giles. There were times, when they’d stood in the foothills of this new mountain they had to climb, when he’d worried that she would crack under the weight of responsibility, but she’d stood firm through those early days and weeks after the world had turned to ashes as a result of Drusilla’s caprice. She’d stood firm and looked up, convincing everyone that the climb and the struggle was worth it, and that
one day they would reach the top, look down and marvel at the view. Xander wasn’t really convinced, but he’d nodded and taken her hand because she was his Willow. She was there for him, just as she’d always been, from some of his youngest days, through his death and beyond. It grieved him that one day he would be the one to watch her die. He wondered if that would be the moment that he finally fell over the edge.

“Xander?” Willow’s insistent voice broke him out of his reverie and he looked up to see her watching him with a mixture of concern and exasperation. “Xander,” she said again.

“What?”

“I was asking you what kind of tea do you want? Earl Grey, or Darjeeling, or I have some Yerba Matte if you’d prefer?”

“Um, I don’t mind. Whatever you’re having is fine.” Spike snorted, but Xander ignored him.

Shaking her head at his lack of decision, Willow turned back, pulled one of the tins out of the cupboard and started spooning the tea into the already warmed pot.
Xander couldn’t see what she’d chosen, but he trusted her judgment that he would like whatever she gave him. Unless it was Lapsang Souchong, which she’d served one day when she was in a really pissy mood and he’d not made things better by wondering how anyone could drink something that tasted of so much smoke. Giles had liked it and Xander knew that was the only reason Willow still kept it in the kitchen. He’d caught her smelling it one day, her eyes closed, tears running down her face and he’d wanted to go to her, but he wasn’t sure he knew how to give comfort anymore. His days as a comfortador had died in the cellar and he wondered fleetingly if, perhaps, he too should have a plaque in the cemetery at Kensal Green.

He flashed back to an image of Giles’ hand curled round one of his delicate china cups, his fingers callused from weapons training and ink stained from wielding weaponry of a more arcane kind, talking about the demon de jour and the prophecy relating to the next week but one. Sometimes Xander wondered why the hell he tortured himself drinking tea at all, given that a vampire didn’t need to consume anything but blood. But something made him do it, and he didn’t feel any desire to analyse too closely whether it was the soul, or his Sire, or the weight of memory that
compelled him partake in these rituals that should have meant so little now that he was dead. Undead. Confused. Tired. So tired.

“Hey, you went away. Where did you go?” Willow set a cup down in front of him and brushed his hair out of his eye, her fingers stroking lightly over the eyebrow above his patch, before she withdrew and sat at the table at right angles to him. Lifting up her own cup, she blew across the surface before taking a tentative sip. “Hot,” she said.

“Funny that,” Spike drawled, leaning against the countertop facing Xander, a tumbler of whisky in his hand. “It’s amazing how, when you boil water, pour it over tea leaves and let it steep for a couple of minutes, you get a brew that’s got some heat in it. Tea’s meant to be hot. Only you bloody Yanks would be surprised, but I guess that’s because of that abomination you call iced tea. Doesn’t have any business sharing the same word as a decent cuppa.”

Xander took a sip of his tea, leaned back in his chair, looking Spike in the eye as he brought his own teacup up in salute. “Way to go, Spike. We haven’t heard that rant in at least a couple of weeks. You’re improving.”
Grinning, Spike raised his tumbler in return. “Can’t improve on perfection. You can just polish it a bit.”

“Yeah, well if you expect me to launch into some kind of polishing joke, of which I think there are many, you’re going to have to look for someone else to be your straight man tonight.” Xander put his cup carefully down on the table. “Thanks for the tea, Wills. Sorry to be a party pooper, but I’m going to turn in.”

She frowned, glancing down at his hardly untouched tea cup. “But it’s only just gone midnight. And you didn’t answer my question.”

“Yeah, I know. Unconventional vampire that’s me. Sleeping half the night, and up half the day.”

He kissed her forehead, nodded to Spike and left the kitchen before she could say anything else, climbing up the old servants’ staircase to the attics, to avoid the slayers rooms at the front of the house. He had come to terms with the remaining slayers, and they with him, but there were times when the memories they evoked, just by existing, were too much. He pondered Willow’s last comment. He hadn’t answered her question.
Where had he gone? Back into his memories, drifting – Spike would have said wallowing, and Willow would worry, and say dwelling. He didn’t have the right word, but drifting seemed to fit as good as any. Sometimes he wondered if, one day, he would drift too far, like a boat uncoupled from its moorings, lost in the sea of his own memories, unable to ever find his way back to safe harbour and dry land. Sometimes he wondered if Drusilla had succeeded in driving him crazy after all. It was a thought that he’d never expressed, but it gnawed at him, worrying at his soul in the few moments he was allowed to be alone.

He reached his room at the end of the attic corridor and unlocked the door. It wasn’t that there was anything really worth stealing, but telling the slayers that a part of the house was off limits was just a red rag to a pack of super-powered bulls. So he’d bought a decent lock and gained as much privacy as he could in a houseful of teenage girls. Undressing quickly, he dumped his clothes on the armchair near the door before he slipped under the old fashioned quilt on the bed and curled up. Through the rabbit warren of old chimneys he could hear the younger slayers on the floors below, squabbling about stolen socks and missing stakes, or maybe it was missing socks and
stolen stakes. He kind of lost track, after a while, and didn’t feel like the effort was worth expending to tie the thought down. Spike had followed him up the stairs only a few minutes later and was down the hall, cursing as he finished the last cigarette in the packet. Xander chuckled, turned over and let the comforting sounds of the house lull him into sleep.

She stood by the river, her hair in ringlets, threaded with scarlet ribbons, her body naked and translucent in the moonlight. “Hello poppet. Don’t you want play? We could play such lovely games. William can tell you about the games. It could be Colonel Mustard in the library with the candle stick. Or maybe Miss Scarlet.” She paused, twirling her finger round a ribbon, bringing it up to her mouth, her tongue coming out to caress the silk in soft kitten licks. “What do you think, my pet? We didn’t get to play. Not before. Not really. We hardly rolled the dice. But now I can feel you. Can taste you. Smell you. You smell like sweet William.” She smiled and ran one crimson tipped finger along her lips. “Sweet, sweet William.

“You thought you could hide from me. Thought you could run from me. But blood knows. Blood speaks.
Blood feels the heartbeat, unbeat, hoof beat – can you hear the horseman when he comes riding? Will you beat for me, my sacrificial lamb? Bleat for me. Bind to me. Be blind for me. You're half way there, but I can make you see. Make you whole. Make you strong.

“Come to me, love. It’s time to pay the piper. Time to pay the price. Feel me through William and take his hand. Light me a candle and kneel down together. The doors of my chapel are wide.”

Xander sat bolt upright, shaking, the quilt pooled at his waist, and he panted, his face slipping to demon as he scoped out the dark corners. Grabbing some sweats, he slid out of bed and pulled them on. He slipped out into the corridor, walking unsteadily past storage attics and the unoccupied room that had once belonged to Dawn, before he reached Spike’s door at the top of the stairs. There was silence beyond and Xander wondered if he’d imagined everything. Did vampires have nightmares that weren’t memory? He had no idea and, after a moment, he slid down the newel post and wrapped his arms round his knees, preparing to wait out the aftermath of his dream.
Thirty seconds later, Spike opened his door and looked down at him, the inevitable eyebrow raised in question. “What the hell? What you doing out here? I thought you were knackered. Least ways, that’s what you told the witch?”

Xander rested his head on his knees, closing his eye as he ran through the memories clamouring in his brain. “I heard her, Spike. Dru. I heard her. She was in my head. She said she can speak to me. Says she wants me. He opened his eye and looked up at Spike, forcing his face from demon back to human. “She says she wants you too.”

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**Part Three**

The main lights in the library were dim, making crazy shadows in the dark corners of the ornate cornicing, but the long research table, that had once belonged to Giles and had seen almost as much research time as its counterparts in the Sunnydale library and the Magic Box, was lit up brightly by two reading lights, that had been shoved to either end to make room for the inevitable pile of books stacked in the centre. Willow and Xander sat across from one another, their heads each buried in a leather bound book, while Spike
stretched out on the leather Chesterfield, a slim volume propped up on his chest, his boots dangling over the end of the armrest.

There was silence, apart from the tick of the clock counting the time as one book was exchanged for another, and another. Spike lit up a cigarette for every tome he pulled from the stack on the floor at his side. The fire in the grate, on the long wall by the shuttered bay window, flared and died back as logs burned down and shifted in the flames and the chimes of the grandfather clock in the corner struck two, then three and finally four. Xander closed his book with a sigh and stretched. “This is useless,” he said. “We’re not going to find anything.”

Willow marked her page with a 6 x 4 card, which was annotated with short notes, in a language Xander didn’t recognize. “You don’t know that. We’ve just not found the right book yet. We have to keep looking.” She shoved a lock of hair back behind her ear, before reaching for the next volume on the pile in front of her with one hand, while with her other she picked up a blank card from the pile at her elbow. Xander could almost see the mantra running through her head ‘Giles would have known.’ Xander had heard her whisper it so
many times over the last months, when she’d forgotten about his shiny new vampire hearing.

“Willow,” he said, resting his hands on both of hers, forcing her to put down the card and close the book she was opening. “We’re not going to find anything. I don’t think there’s anything there that will help. If there had been, we would have used it before, when Dru first came after me.”

Shaking her head, she pulled one hand free and Xander saw her eyes flick from her hand to the closed book at her fingertips, but before she could open it, he recaptured her hands and twinned his fingers through hers until they were joined, knuckle to knuckle. Lifting them to his mouth, he gently kissed the top of her wrists. “I’d be happy to be wrong,” he said. “Tell me why you think we’ll find something?” He was aware that Spike had stopped reading and was watching them, but he kept his attention fixed on Willow.

“Before, it was different,” she paused, as if groping for an explanation that would mean something to him. “She came after you physically before. Even when you thought you’d dreamed about her, we realised later that she’d actually been there in your room, in Oxford.
But this, this isn’t physical. This is a psychic attack. That puts it in a whole different realm and it’s one we should be able to find a solution for.”

“Witch is right.” Xander turned to see Spike swing his legs off the Chesterfield’s arm and stand, tossing the latest priceless volume down on the floor besides the rest of his stack. “Dru’s always been able to get to people in dreams. Manipulate them in their sleep, until they don’t know whether they’re coming or going.”

Pulling her hands free from Xander’s grasp, Willow shoved her chair back from the desk and stood, turning to face Spike. “Did you just forget to mention that when you were persuading Xander to let himself be turned? Did it just conveniently slip your mind?” Her voice was low and full of the kind of mistrust Xander hadn’t heard in months, since she and Spike had forged a tentative détente based on Xander’s well-being. Now, he could see that agreement crumbling in front of him. He opened his mouth to intervene, but Willow was already moving, getting in Spike’s face. “You said he’d be safe from her,” she continued, her anger starting to simmer.”That she couldn’t touch him. That you could protect him.”
“Willow, don’t.” Xander stood and moved to stand at her side, putting his hand on her shoulder. “Please don’t.”

“It’s true, Xander. He promised and he lied. He lied to us.” She took a breath. “He lied to me.”

Spike looked from one to the other and glanced down at the just lit cigarette in his hand before replying. “I know that I promised. Meant it too. Guess I didn’t think about dreams. I’ve never seen her do that trick with a vampire. Not in over a hundred years. She’s only ever done it on humans. Never occurred to me that she’d work that kind of mojo on a non-human. Never occurred to me that it would work.” He glanced back down at the smoke in his hand before bringing it up to his mouth and inhaling deeply.

Xander nodded slowly, not liking Spike’s explanation, but accepting it, nonetheless. But Willow brought her hand up quickly, as if she was going to strike a blow, and grabbed at the cigarette between Spike’s lips. Turning, she tossed it into the fire, before rounding back on her target. “I guess you’re not so perfect after all.”
Spike glanced over at the grate and then back at Willow, his gaze resting briefly on Xander before he replied. “Guess not.”

Running a hand through his hair, Xander sighed. “Look, this isn’t getting us anywhere. It’s all water under the bridge, and there’s no use crying over spilt milk, and any other cliché that you can think of. Can we stop with the blame and work out what to do. If there is anything we can do. Wills, if you think you can find something in one of those books, go for it. I just don’t know how to help.” He smiled slightly and shrugged. “Some things don’t change.”

Frowning, Willow swatted him hard on the arm. “Stop it,” she said sharply. “Now tell me again what Drusilla said to you.”

“I’ve just got fragments, which is weird, because right after I woke up it was all so clear in my head. I could have quoted every line. But now, even a few hours later, it’s all kind of hazy, like it’s just static on the radio. All I remember is a whole lot of Dru mumble and rubbish.” He glanced over at Spike. “You know what she’s like. She said she wanted to play games. Said she could feel me through the blood. Through Spike’s
blood. That she wanted me and she wanted Spike. Oh, and there was something disturbing about sacrificial lambs”

“Lambs and blood,” Spike whispered. “It’s all in the blood.”

“What do you mean?” Willow said curiously.

“Just thinking about that bitch, Glory. About her bloody tower of Babel, and the Bit trussed up like a sacrificial lamb. The Slayer said it was all about the blood. Blood was life. Dawn’s blood was her blood. One was created from the other.”

“Like Xander was created from you?” Willow glanced at Xander, before turning her attention back to Spike, her anger seemingly evaporating in the face of a new perspective.

“Dru never tasted Xander’s blood. But she knows the scent and the taste and the texture of mine. She’s painted pictures on walls with it, cave paintings of her games and her kills. She knows it like a lover knows a sweet spot. She can feel my blood in him and that’s her way in.”
Sensing that Willow was processing the new information and probably wasn’t going to try to do something nasty to Spike, in the next few minutes, Xander moved away to the fireplace. He leaned his forearms on the mantle, let his head rest against the back of his hands and stared into the flames. “Okay,” he said. “So now that you’ve stopped with the waxing poetical, what you’re basically saying is that she can reach me because we’re all one big dysfunctional vampire family. You’re my Sire and she’s your Sire, so that makes me her grandchild, and that’s how she can get to me. So what we need is the equivalent of a big psychic lock on the door to keep the crazy granny out of the house.” He pushed himself off the mantelpiece and turned round, rubbing his fingers tiredly across the skin just below his eye patch. “Don’t listen to me,” he said with a sigh. “I’m tired and I’m raving.”

“Actually Xander,” Willow replied slowly. “I think you might just be right.”

The “what”, came simultaneously from both Xander and Spike, followed by a “Hey, don’t sound so surprised, I can be right sometimes,” from Xander alone. Spike grinned and lit another cigarette.
“So come on, Wills. Enlighten me. Why am I right? Not that I’ve any objections to being right. I’ve been right lots of times. But not so much recently. Not so much…” He trailed off, but the unspoken ‘not since everyone died. Not since I was turned’ hung in the air. Willow rushed forward to give him a short, hard hug before pulling him away from the fire and pushing him down on the Chesterfield, where Spike had been lounging before.

“Okay,” she said. "Spike talked about blood. About Drusilla finding you through his blood, because it’s the blood that creates the connection between the three of you. So we need to find a way to cut the connection between you two and Drusilla. Xander, you mentioned family and it got me thinking. Do you remember the books?"

“We’re standing in a library, Witch. You need to be a bit more specific.”

Willow folded her arms and glared at Spike. Xander thought about getting up and standing between them, but decided that he was too tired to play the diplomat, or the hero. “Spike’s got a point, Will. What books?”
“The books you brought back from Europe, just before...” she stopped and uncrossed her arms, shoving her hands into the pockets of her jeans. “The one from Lisbon and the one from Venice. Just because they were a red herring, at the time, doesn’t downgrade their validity as important magical documents. They were about how magic works on people who are linked. Who have some kind of connection. We wanted to know if there was anything in them that would be useful, with all the Slayers we’ve now got. Slayers are supernatural creatures, so I wonder if there’s anything in them that might be relevant to other types of supernatural family connections. One book acted as a lock and the other as the key. I’ve looked at them a few times over the last few months, not in any detail because, to be honest, there hasn’t been the time, and I’ve only approached them from a Slayer perspective. But there might be something there we could use. I mean, it’s got to be worth a try.”

Xander looked at Willow doubtfully and then at Spike, who shrugged. “Okay, Wills, book me.” He pushed himself up off the Chesterfield and stretched. “But if we don’t find anything by sunrise, I really am going to have to get some sleep and you should probably do the
same, Dru or no Dru.”

Willow grinned and rushed off to the shelves behind Xander, pulled the two books out of the cabinet and brought them over the desk. “Okay,” she said brightly. “We can get started. Spike, you take one and Xander can take the other. I’ll grab the notes I’d already made and see if there’s anything in there that might be useful.”

Sunrise came and went, and despite Xander’s threat to go to sleep and his admonishment to Willow to do the same, the three of them were still deep in their research when the grandfather clock stuck 7.30. Xander and Spike sat at opposite ends of the long table, with Willow between them on the side facing the fireplace. At the sound of the chimes, Willow glanced up at the clock and then back down at her notes, her pen stuck behind her ear, ready for action with another annotation, if needed. Xander watched her out of the corner of his eye, thinking back to all the times he’d seen her in study mode, from kindergarten through to apocalypse. He pulled his meandering thoughts back to the present, as the chimes of the clock finished and Spike got up from his chair, book still in hand, and headed for the whisky decanter in the cabinet on the
end wall. Needing a break from the research, Xander turned in his wooden swivel chair and watched Spike pour a generous measure of whisky, before wandering back towards the desk, sipping his drink thoughtfully as he continued to read. Xander wondered if that was how Spike had looked before he was turned, the scholar buried deep in his books, shutting the world out, using words as his shield. In some ways, Xander mused, not much had changed, although now Spike knew how to use words to attack, as well as defend. Waiting until Spike was level with him, Xander leaned back in his chair. “So you didn’t think to offer anyone else a drink?” he asked.

Spike paused at his side and looked startled. “What?”

“Whisky, and the getting thereof. Not very polite to get one for yourself, and not offer the rest of us anything.”

“Yeah, because I’m sure the witch there is just dying for a dram at this time of the morning.”

Xander glanced over at Willow, who just shook her head at the pair of them and went back to her notes. “Okay, you could at least have asked me.”
“You might only have one eye, but you’ve got two legs and two arms, the last time I looked. That makes you capable of getting up and getting your own sodding drink, if you’re that fussed about it. I have to say, it’s good stuff.” He took a sip as if to emphasise his point, before looking back down at the book in his other hand. Xander watched as he saw Spike freeze, the whisky tumbler half way to his mouth.

“What’s wrong,” he asked urgently, but Spike shook his head, put the glass down on the table and took a few steps backwards, stopped and then walked forward until he was level with Xander again.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

“Quite probably, but what for specifically?”

“There’s stuff in here,” Spike waved the book in the air. “It wasn’t here before. I’m standing next to you and bob’s your uncle, there are suddenly whole paragraphs that weren’t here when I was looking at it before. When I walked away, they disappeared, and then reappeared when I came back and stood right here again.”
“Okay,” Xander said uncertainly. “So the magical book likes my aftershave or something.”

Willow pushed her notes to the side and leaned forward, her chin resting on her clasped hands. “I think it’s more likely that the book likes the other book.” She nodded towards the leather bound tome in front of Xander. “It must be close proximity that makes them work together.” She glanced at the chair Spike had occupied at the other end of the table. “Really close proximity. Maybe you were too far away before, but when you stopped right by Xander, you also stopped by the other book and were close enough for the key to activate the lock.”

“So, what?” Spike said warily. “Does that mean I’ve got to sit in Harris’ lap to keep the mojo working?”

“Or you could just pull up a chair and sit next to me, so the books can start talking to each other,” Xander suggested.

Spike grabbed the discarded whisky tumbler and tossed back the contents in one long swallow. “It’s like being back in bloody school,” he grumbled, but he steadied the hand holding the book on Xander’s shoulder, and
hooked the leg of nearby chair with his foot, pulling it towards him. With a sigh, he slumped down into the seat at right angles to Xander, bringing the book down to rest of the table, until its corner was touching the corner of Xander’s book.

Xander watched as Spike continued to read, his white hands turning the pages quickly, one after the other, his expression tense. After a few minutes, Xander risked a glance over at Willow, who was also intently watching the scene. He wanted to break the silence, somehow lighten the atmosphere, but before he could speak, he heard a curse and turned back in time to see Spike throw his book down onto the table with a thump.

“Fuck,” Spike said, leaning back in his chair and glaring at the ceiling. Xander and Willow glanced at each other and then watched him curiously.

“Okay,” Xander said slowly. “Is that a general ‘fuck, I’m tired’, a specific ‘fuck, I’ve had enough’, or the ever popular, ‘fuck, it’s the end of the world, Flash, and we’ve only got three minutes to save the earth’?”

“Tosser,” Spike replied, but there was no heat in his
voice. He leaned forward, his elbows resting on the table. “That was a ‘fuck, the witch was half right about the books being useful’.”

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it?” Xander looked over at Willow and was glad to see she looked as confused as he felt. “Half right, is half more than we had a few hours ago. So what half was right?”

“The books are useful because they gave us some more information. One book is a lock and the other is a key. Put them together and one helps you read the other.”

“Well we kind of figured that out, what with the amazing appearing and disappearing text.”

“So what this bloody thing is saying is that,” Spike poked at the spine of the book in front of him, pushing it away as if was contaminated. “Now we have a lock and a key, we need something to attach them to. Something like a door. There’s a third book. One the Watcher didn’t know about, because it’s not until you have the two together that it tells you. The third book is the door, and I’m thinking, for anything useful to help block Dru, we’re going to need to bar that door.”
“Brilliant,” Xander said with a groan, laying his head on the table and then rolling it to one side so that he could see Spike out of his good eye. “Don’t suppose that it tells us where the third book is?”

“In a manner of speaking, yeah. The lock and key are usually kept separate, apart from when they’re not, like now. But the door could be kept with either of the other two, because it won’t work without all three being together.”

“So you’re saying...?”

“I’m saying that it’s probably where we collected the other two books. So that means Venice or Lisbon.”

“So that means having to go there to see if it’s there,” Willow interjected. “I don’t really see what the problem is.”

Xander banged his head on the table and then sat up, looking directly at Spike. “Well fuck,” he said.

Spike nodded. “ Couldn’t have put it better myself.”
Part Four

After some debate, Xander and Spike agreed that Lisbon should be the first port of call. Willow had argued that the flight to Venice was slightly shorter, so it made more sense to start there, especially when she pointed out that the Council had excellent resources in the city they could take advantage of. She was overruled when Spike and Xander put up a stubborn and united front against her logic. They didn’t actually admit to Willow, or to each other, that they were trying to avoid an encounter with Gabriella, but the look on Spike’s face told Xander exactly what he was thinking. Xander was fairly sure his own expression was identical.

With a lecture about difficult, stubborn men ringing in their ears, and a general plea to be careful and come back quickly and safely, they left Willow to mind the slayers and caught the late afternoon flight to Lisbon. Their decision meant facing Melina when they arrived, who was still formidable in her own right, but definitely more approachable than Gabriella.
Xander stretched out his legs as much as he could in the cramped economy seating. A stewardess made her second pass down the aisle, selling drinks and nibbles and he grinned when the man in the seat in front grumbled about how free drinks and nuts used to be part of the flying experience. He glanced over at Spike, who was plugged into his i-pod, oblivious to anything but Lou Reed and the large drink in his hand, so Xander smiled up at the stewardess, pulled his wallet out of his pocket and bought a second JD for Spike and a beer for himself. He sipped slowly, his thoughts turning inevitably to the long, warm September of the year before, that he had spent in Melina’s city, her company and her bed. They were good memories, tainted irrevocably by the tragic ending, when he’d found Rosanna’s body in the silent courtyard.

Xander had spoken to Melina only once on the phone, since then, not wanting her to hear about the rest of Drusilla’s rampage and his own culpability, from someone else. She’d listened and said little, other than that she didn’t blame him, at least, not after the early days of her grief had given way to a clearer perspective. She’d said that she hoped he would visit Lisbon again, someday. As the plane came in to land
and taxied along the runway, he admitted to himself that if there hadn’t been a problem to solve, he probably wouldn’t have had the courage to come back.

The transfer from aircraft, to arrivals, to taxi, went smoothly, thanks to a little Willow magic on their documentation, and Xander sat in the back seat of the cab, wondering what he was going to say when they reached their destination.

The inside of the taxi was hot, despite the pathetic attentions of an ailing air conditioning system. Xander was hyper aware of the chemical smell from the air freshener hanging from the driver’s rear view mirror and the aroma of the half drunk cup of cold coffee that was wedged in between the gear stick and the front passenger seat. The remains of a sandwich was bundled in a piece of wax paper next to the coffee cup – Xander could smell tomato, ham and strong cheese that was several days over ripe. He sat back in the seat, looking straight ahead at the blacktop disappearing under the wheels of the car, and not for the first time or, he suspected for the last, mused on the downside of vampire senses.

Spike broke into his introspection with an elbow to the
ribs. “So, give me the skinny about this girl of yours.”

“She’s not a girl. And she’s not mine,” Xander replied.

“Compared to me, she’s a teenager. You’ve got to stop thinking in human terms.” Leaning back in the corner of the seat, his back half against the side window, he looked knowingly at Xander. “You’ve got to remember that you’re not.”

“What? Not human?” Xander glanced quickly at the taxi driver and was relieved to see he was too busy chatting on his cell phone as he navigated through the airport traffic, to pay attention to the conversation going on in the back of the cab. Xander was tempted to look over at Spike, but knew that he would only get drawn into a debate he didn’t want to have. He stared straight ahead. “I got the memo, Spike. Believe me, I know.”

“Sure you do,” Spike drawled. “But you still try to act like it. With the slayers, and with the witch. You’re still fixing windows; you just tend to do it when most folk are asleep, these days.”

“Are you going to analyse me the whole trip?”
“No. Just reminding you that I’m not stupid.” Spike leaned across the seat until his mouth was just behind Xander’s ear. “That I know you.”

Xander chuckled, but didn’t rise to the bait. “I can’t believe I’m actually saying this, but I know you’re not stupid, Spike. Arrogant and narcissistic, maybe, but not stupid.”

Spike whistled. It sounded loud and shrill in the small cab. “Narcissistic, now that’s a big, $100 word.”

“Yeah, well, that’s me used up my quota for the day. Don’t expect any more flashes of verbal gymnastics. I’ll let you carry the load for a while and I’ll go back to grunting.”

“So what about your girl?”

Sighing, Xander scrubbed the side of his face, tiredly. “You don’t give up, do you? Okay, her name is Melina, but you already know that, so I don’t really know why you’re asking. She was a good friend. She made me welcome and took care of me, after I was burned out from Morocco.” Xander didn’t have to look over to
imagine the leer on Spike’s face. “Yes, we slept together. No, I’m not giving you details. I liked her a lot. She was a good listener and she didn’t judge.”

“Not even after her girl was killed.”

Xander shuddered. Jack O’Toole had nothing on Spike when it came to building bombs to inflict damage. The fact that the shrapnel was words just made it all the more dangerous. Swallowing hard, Xander turned to face Spike. “Don’t bring it up, Spike, please. I know you used it as a weapon last year, in Venice, but please don’t do it here. I don’t know what it’s going to be like. Seeing her again. Bringing up memories. If Melina wants to talk about Rosanna, let her bring it up.”

Putting his hand on Spike’s shoulder, Xander shook it gently. “Promise me.”

Spike glanced down at the long, pale fingers, resting against the black leather of his coat. “Yeah, okay,” he said finally. Xander pulled his hand away and went back to watching the road ahead.

The taxi stopped in front of Melina’s small house on the edge of the Alfama and Xander thrust some crumpled Euro notes at the driver. He got out of the
cab with Spike at his back, shouldered his duffle and stood in front of the bright yellow door, thinking of all the times he’d stood there before, flowers or bottle of wine in hand. His memory shied away from the picture of Rosanna in her yellow t-shirt, that last day, talking about her school work over breakfast, after Xander had slipped from her mother’s bed.

He raised his hand to knock, but before he could make contact, the door swung open and Melina stood on the threshold. To human eyes, she looked almost unchanged, but Xander could see the fine lines around her eyes and mouth and the beginnings of grey in her hair, that spoke of grief and weariness, and the lack of any desire to take care of herself when no one was there to see.

“Melina,” he whispered. His hand was still raised from his aborted knocking and he reached forward, overwhelmed with the sudden desire to touch her face as he had so many times before. But his finger met resistance from the unseen barrier between them and he lowered his hand, stepped back and dropped his eyes to the ground.

“Xander, please,” she said, but he didn’t look up.
“Right then,” Spike intervened. “You must be Melina. Boy’s talked about you a bit. Didn’t spill any secrets though, which is bloody annoying. He’s like a clam, with his screwed up sense of honour. I’m Spike. You might have heard of me.” Xander heard Spike step forward until they were standing shoulder to shoulder. “I’m sorry for your loss,” Spike said formally and Xander’s head shot up, turning to stare at Spike in horror. “I’m sorry for your loss,” Spike said formally and Xander’s head shot up, turning to stare at Spike in horror. “It’s hard to lose family,” he continued. “I reckon that you don’t ever really get over it.” He glanced at Xander and then back to Melina.

“Spike, you, you...” Xander stuttered, but Melina interrupted him.

“Thank you,” she said, nodding to Spike. “You are right. We never get over it, but we survive.” Her eyes copied Spike’s movement as she glanced at Xander before looking Spike directly in the eye. “That’s all any one of us can do – survive.”

She stepped back, standing sideways, with the yellow door at her back. “Xander, Spike, you are welcome. Please come in.”
Placing his hand in the small of Xander’s back, Spike gave him a gentle shove forward. Xander resisted for a second, before taking a step across the threshold, into the coolness of the hall beyond. He stopped next to the small oak table along one wall, noticing that Melina still kept her car keys in the blue china bowl and her sunglasses in the shallow, scallop-shell tray, next to it. He turned to see Spike coming in behind him, before Melina shut the door and walked by them to the end of the long hall.

She paused by the kitchen door and looked back. “Willow telephoned to say that you were coming. I know this is difficult for you, Xander. I’ve thought about you often, this last year. I wish you had a happier reason to come back.”

Shaking his head, Xander placed his duffle on the floor next to the table and walked forward until he was standing inches away. “Don’t ever wish, Melina. Not about this.” He raised his hand again and, this time, there was no barrier. He ran his thumb lightly along her cheek, feeling the warmth of her flesh and the blood pumping so close to the surface. He was hyper aware of her every breath, the texture of her skin and the sound of her heart beating. Shuddering, he stepped
back and again felt Spike’s hand, solid at the base of his spine.

“So here we are,” Spike said. “Just like the witch promised. Are we going to discuss business in the hall?”

“What?” she replied, looking distractedly at Spike. “No, of course not. My apologies. My manners have taken a holiday. Please come this way. Let me take your coat.”

“It’s all right, love. I’ll hang on to it, if you don’t mind.”

“As you like. We can go through to the sun room. It is still warm from the afternoon, and it is a pleasant room to sit and talk in. Xander, you know the way.”

Nodding, Xander walked through the kitchen door and noted that little had changed since he was there last. He ran his hand along the pine table that he had helped to revarnish, rubbing his fingers absently across the gaudy raffia table mats that were scattered haphazardly across the wooden surface, protecting it from the weight of the imposing stoneware fruit bowl and the large glass vase stuffed with dried lavender. He looked up and stopped, his eyes fixed on the array of
photographs on the dresser. Melina, holding Rosanna as a baby. Rosanna in her communion dress. Melina laughing with Roberto the barman in the roof top café. And at the end, one of Melina and himself, standing hand in hand, grinning for the camera, with their backs to one of the graffitied walls that Lisbon was famous for. Xander stared at the photo for a long moment, then glanced behind him.

Melina smiled. “Do you remember that day?” she asked.” We had an argument about whether graffiti could ever be considered art and I took you to the Galeria de Arte Urbana, to prove to you that I was right.”

“As if you actually had to provide evidence to prove that you were right.”

“That’s true,” she replied with a soft smile. “If I say something is true, then of course it must be so. But it was fun to rub your nose in your own false assumptions.

“It was a good day,” Xander said softly, running his hand absently along the edge of the table.
“Just because things have changed, doesn’t change the memory, Xander. That remains, and it will always remain.” She glanced over at Spike, who was leaning against the edge of the door jamb, half in and out of the kitchen, watching the interchange. “But we are dallying again, and Spike will become impatient. Let us go through.” She skirted by Xander and made her way to the door on the other side of the kitchen, before pausing. “I should have told you,” she said. “But seeing you here has brought back so many memories, and has thrown me, despite the fact that I thought I was prepared. I have a guest. I would ask you to be courteous.”

Xander glanced back at Spike, who shrugged, and they both followed Melina into the candlelit sunroom. Lemon trees in large terracotta pots lined the glass walls and stretched up to the ceiling, and winter flowering jasmine spilled over climbing frames and filled the small room with a heady fragrance. But Xander’s eye was fixed on the peacock chair at the far end of the room, by the door that led to the outside courtyard.

“Hello Gabriella,” he said.
“Alexander,” Gabriella inclined her head in acknowledgement of his greeting. “It has been...” she paused as if searching for the right word, “eventful, I think is probably apt. It has been an eventful year since I saw you last.”

“That’s one way of putting it, I guess,” he said warily, rubbing his hands down the sides of his pants. He wondered how the hell Gabriella could make them feel clammy, when he really didn’t sweat anymore.

“I am sorry for your losses. Mr Giles was a good man and an excellent Watcher, despite some of his more unorthodox methods. He is missed. And the Summers sisters, both such contributors to the fight, each in their own unique way.”

Xander noticed she didn’t mention Andrew, but it wasn’t surprising, given that Andrew had never met any of the older European Watchers. Despite his more grandiose fantasist moments, he had had a strong sense of self preservation and had always taken care to fly well below their radar. Xander shuddered inwardly at the very idea of Andrew and Gabriella in the same room.
“Thank you,” he said, aiming to match her, courtesy for courtesy, but he could hear the slight tremor in his own voice and was oddly comforted, for the third time since they’d arrived in Lisbon, by the feel of Spike’s hand resting lightly at the base of his spine.

The hand moved and Spike eased forward, fully into the candlelight. “Not got a greeting for me, Gabriella?” he asked, with the hint of a grin dancing on his lips.

Gabriella leaned back in her seat, looking every inch the queen, framed by the flair of the peacock chair’s extravagant back. “Spike. I’d say that it was a pleasure, but we both know that I would be being less than truthful. However, we are guests in Melina’s house, so I believe I can say, with some sincerity, that I am glad Alexander has company at this time.”

“Thank you, Gabriella. Like you say, all guests and mutual appreciation. I can do that.”

Xander glanced back at Melina, who was still standing by the doorway to the kitchen, and he was relieved when she winked and stepped forward, until she was standing halfway between Spike and Gabriella. Not for
the first time, Xander acknowledged to himself that the role of mediator was one that came naturally to her. It was a trait he had taken advantage of on more than one occasion, the year before, when dealing with some of the more difficult members of Lisbon’s supernatural underbelly.

“Gentlemen,” she said, glancing from Spike to Xander and back again. “Meeting old acquaintances is always invigorating. Perhaps you would like to sit down and, as my guests, I can bring you some refreshments?”

Melina’s comment was couched as a question, but it was clear by the hint of steel in her voice that the invitation to sit was an order. Xander and Spike moved almost as one and sat, kitty corner to each other in the rattan chairs, Xander with his back to the kitchen wall and Spike directly facing Gabriella and the patio door.

“So refreshments?” she repeated. “Gabriella, may I get you another drink?”

“Thank you; you are very kind. Another sherry would be most welcome.”

Lifting Gabriella’s empty glass from the side table,
Melina turned to Xander. “What can I get you? I’m afraid the short notice of your arrival means that I have not had the chance to get any blood. But I can direct you to a reputable supplier, once we have talked.”

Xander opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out. The idea of Melina thinking about buying blood for him, made his stomach heave. He stared at his hands, gripping the loose fabric on the side pockets of his pants, watching, almost mesmerized, as his fingers flexed and curled against the dark material.

“We’ll take you up on that offer of directions later, pet,” Spike said. “Right now, a beer would hit the spot. He’ll have the same.”

Looking up, Xander smiled weakly when he saw Melina watching him, a concerned look on her face. She nodded to Spike and left the room. Xander glanced over at Spike and then across to Gabriella, who was watching him, her expression unreadable. Despite an almost overwhelming need to look away, he made himself meet her gaze. She hadn’t changed much in the year since their last encounter. Her hair had a small streak of white at the temple, but while Melina’s grey spoke of a lack of care, Gabriella’s looked as studied as
her immaculate makeup and the light, cream linen trouser suit she wore. Living amongst so many girls, Xander automatically looked down to check her shoes and was surprised that, instead of the expected Italian leather heels, she wore a pair of black and gold, flat sandals. Her toe nails were painted scarlet.

He looked up as Melina reentered the room, tray of drinks in hand. Catching Gabriella’s eye, he knew that if he’d still been human, he would have blushed at the thought that he’d been studying her feet. The sight of her painted toenails seemed strangely intimate, as if he’d caught a glimpse of the woman under the Watcher’s mantle. Accepting his beer from Melina, he took a long gulp to clear his head, watching as the rest of the drinks were distributed and Melina sat down in the chair next to him.

Silence reigned, for a few short seconds that felt like a lifetime, until Xander gave in to one of the questions in his head.

“How is Annunciata?” he asked.

Gabriella sipped her sherry and put it down on the table beside her before replying. “She is well. She has
adopted Ilario. He now stays with her at the house and helps with the chores, when he is not at school.” She smiled. “He still fights her whenever he needs his hair cutting. Some things do not change.”

Xander took another gulp of his beer. “I’m glad”, he said, his eyes fixed on the drip of condensation running down the outside of his glass.

“She doesn’t blame you, Alexander.” Xander’s head jerked up. He felt like someone had pulled on a puppet string. “She grieves for her sister, for the loss of Illario’s mother. But she also grieves for you. For the decisions you had to make.”

“Do you blame me?” Xander asked, his voice low but his eyes fixed on her face.

Shrugging, she reached for her sherry glass again and gazed into the pale, golden depths before looking up. “There was a time when I would have done so. But life is complicated. I do not like the decision that you made, but I believe that you felt you had no other choice at the time. We all do things that others may frown upon, when we have no choice. Choice is the important word. So in that respect, no, I do not blame
you. You did not kill Elena. I am content to follow Annunciata’s lead.”

“Thank you.”

“Why are you here, Gabriella?” Spike said, slouching back in his chair, his legs straight out in front of him, crossed at the ankle. “Not that it’s not a pleasure to see you, but Lisbon’s not exactly on your beat.”

“Europe is a small place, Spike. You know that. Venice and its surroundings may be my beat, as you so colourfully phrase it, but no area is too far out of reach. I received a telephone call from Miss Rosenberg last night. She told me that you were searching for a third book. One that was related to those you sought last year. That it was likely to be either in Lisbon or Venice. For some reason, you decided to start your search in Lisbon, despite her best counsel.” She smiled knowingly. “I thought I would save you the journey and come to you. Melina was kind enough to welcome me.”

“So are you saying the book is definitely here in Lisbon?” Spike asked, straightening up, his posture transforming from relaxed to alert in the blink of an eye.
She shook her head. “I cannot say that for certain. But I am sure it is not in Venice. There is very little of a magical or supernatural nature in that city, that I do not know about. I would have heard.”

Spike tilted his head and smiled. “But you were so eager to see us again, that you came tripping all the way to Portugal. Maybe when we’ve sorted out this mess we could go for a coffee. Catch up on old times, yeah?”

Xander glanced from Spike to Gabriella and back, knowing by the way her expression changed that Spike was having fun, without ever losing the veneer of courtesy that the rules of hospitality demanded. He decided it was time to bring the conversation back on track. “So why did you come, Gabriella? Have you heard something?”

“No, not exactly,” she replied. “But I do have some information that I thought might be pertinent and I don’t always trust technology. Venice has been a city of intrigue for a thousand years. The communication age has only enhanced its penchant for whispering in corners. When I last saw you, you came in search of a
book that Spike had liberated in one of the shadier parts of the city – the partner of the one you collected here in Lisbon. Spike was sure, at the time, that the books were somehow linked to the two deaths that had occurred up to that point.” She glanced over at Melina and then back to Xander. “After I parted from you at the railway station, there was perhaps a week before I heard what had happened in London. That the books were incidental. I understand that, at that time, you had other things on your mind than informing me that you had moved away from the books as a catalyst for the murders and onto other matters. However, since I was unaware of those developments, in that intervening week I did some research, to see what I could discover of their true nature.”

“If you found something that was important enough to travel here, why didn’t you call us at the time?” Xander asked curiously.

“Because by then I had heard that the books were an aside and nothing to do with the deaths. The news of Mr Giles and the Miss Summers’ deaths travelled quickly through the supernatural community. In the face of such tragedy, the small amount of information that I had gained did not seem important.”
“But now you think it might be?” Spike asked, looking at her over the rim of his glass.

“The books are about magic and how it affects families, both those linked by blood and those who are closely connected by other means. I knew Mr Giles was interested in them, because of their implications for the many slayers who had been called. After searching some of the contemporary texts, I discovered other references to family magic. To the fact that the strength of the magic is directly connected to the strength of the ties between family members. The potentials were connected long before they were activated, even if they didn’t know it at the time. Now, in this new era, we understand that the slayers, while not telepathic, are hyper aware of the movements and thoughts of each other. It’s what makes them even more formidable as fighters. The strength of the magic driving them is the empowering spell. It split, like light passing through a prism, and the potential slayers absorbed it. The magic is individual to each slayer, but like the light, it is also part of a seamless whole. It makes them who they are and binds them together.”

“You’re not telling us anything we don’t already know.
The girls can kick the arses of most of the big and uglies, from London to Lima.”

“Exactly. From an intellectual perspective, what I found only confirmed what we had long surmised. When the books were discovered to be irrelevant to the situation last year, there seemed no urgency in raising the little I had found. I had intended to discuss it with Mr Giles, the next time I saw him.”

“But now you’re here, so you’ve obviously changed your mind.”

“Miss Rosenberg told me about the dream Alexander had. That Drusilla had found a way into his dreams. And that you had discovered the existence of a third book that might act as a door, to the lock and key we already have.”

“And you remembered what you’d discovered last year.” Spike leaned forward, staring at her.

“Correct. Having intellectual speculation confirmed and realizing the implications of it, are two different things. I remembered that strong magic can trigger an even stronger bond within families, depending on the nature
of the bonds between its members. Xander was turned by you and you were turned by Drusilla. You have a family connection that runs deep within you all.”

“But we know this,” Xander said, puzzled by the direction of her thoughts. “We’re one big, unhappy vampire family. And turning isn’t strong magic. It’s a blood exchange and putting a situation vacant sign up for the demon.”

Gabriella shook her head. “The magic isn’t in your turning. It’s in the ensouling. Your soul was secured by one of the most powerful witches in the world. You received blood from Spike, also ensouled, through magical trials in Africa, and we have no understanding of the real nature of the magic he experienced there. Spike has the blood of Drusilla running through his veins and she is a powerful seer and magic user. The power is cumulative and similar in that way to the Slayers' spell. Each piece of magic fuels the next and reflects back on itself, again and again.”

“Like a hall of mirrors in a funhouse,” Xander said quietly.

“If you like. Once I heard that Drusilla was meddling
again, I had a responsibility to tell you what I had learned, so you could add it to what you had already deduced for yourselves. It is the strength of your bond that I believe lies at the root of your problem. If the third book is indeed here, in Lisbon, it may give you clues to how to use the bond to your advantage, either as a defence, or as a weapon. At this point, I am not clear which option, if either, will be open to you.”

To hear Gabriella sound almost uncertain was unsettling and silence hung in the small, candlelit room, for what seemed like an endless time, before Melina spoke. “Did you bring the other books with you?” she asked.

“We thought about it,” Xander replied. “But Willow pointed out that hauling around two magical books that might help us with our problem, while Dru was somewhere on the loose, might not be the most sensible idea. It seemed better to track down the third one and take it back to Will in London.”

“I’m glad to hear that, at least in some things, you listen to Miss Rosenberg’s counsel,” Gabriella said.

Xander laughed quietly. “Listening to Will is kind of an
ingrained habit of mine. She’s normally right. I just sometimes don’t want to admit it.” He studied the scuffed toes of his boots for a second before looking up. “So I guess, now that we’ve got a bit more information, we need to see about tracking down the book.” He glanced over at Melina. “I’m thinking we should pay a call on Tiago, since he had the first one. It would make sense if the little creep had an idea of where it might be, if he doesn’t have it himself.”

“A good suggestion,” Melina replied. “But I know that Tiago has been absent from the city for a few days.” She smiled briefly at Xander’s questioning look. “You remember that I like to keep my ear to the ground. Lisbon is not a big city. The absence of a chaos mage is easily noted. However, I do not think he will be absent for long, if he can be judged by his normal habits. It may be that you will have to cool your heels for a few days. Perhaps show Spike the sights?” she finished with a wider smile.

The thought of playing tour guide to Spike almost made Xander spill his beer. He put the glass hastily on the table at his side before he could make a fool of himself. “Sure,” he said. “I can do that.”
Spike snorted and sprawled back in his chair, his eyes fixed on Gabriella. “You going to stick around as well? You could come sightseeing with us, if you like?”

Xander glanced from one to the other and decided that playing the diplomat had the potential to get old, very quickly. “Thank you for all your information, Gabriella,” he interrupted, before Spike could think about anything else to bait her with. “You didn’t have to come. I’m grateful. I’ll understand if you have to get back to your duties in Venice.”

She waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. “Consider it a debt paid, for you having to spend two days on the Orient Express with Spike.”

Spike raised a finger and Xander rose hastily to his feet, grabbed Spike’s hand and pulled it down to his side. “The last couple of days have been a bit crazy,” he said. “If you don’t think we’re rude, I’d like to get some air and clear my head. Think about what we know.”

He glanced over at Melina, who nodded and pushed herself out of her chair. “Of course. Go ahead. Gabriella and I have much to talk about. Take time to get reacquainted with the city. If you need blood, there is a
butcher near to Roberto’s bar. Mention that you are staying with me and they will give you what you need.”

Xander dipped his head again before meeting her eyes. “Thank you. You took such good care of me last year and here you are doing it again.”

“It is what a good hostess does,” she said with a faint smile. “Now go, and take Spike with you before he and Gabriella run out of polite things to say to each other. You may use the outside door, here. Go across the courtyard and down the steps at the back. You remember the way?”

Nodding, Xander leaned over and, after a moment’s hesitation, kissed her lightly on the cheek. “I remember. And thank you,” he said again. He turned to Gabriella, who nodded regally to him, before taking another sip of her sherry. “Right,” he said. “We’ll see you later.” He opened the glass door and stepped out into the fragrant night.

Turning, he saw that Spike had stopped next to Gabriella. Neither was speaking, but Xander felt like he was watching a movie in a language he didn’t understand. He bit his lip, wondering whether to go
back in, but paused when he saw Spike bow, an oddly courtly gesture, and he watched Gabriella’s hands curl hard on the arms of her chair.

Spike sauntered out of the door, to Xander’s side, a self-satisfied smirk on his face. "Right then,” he said. “Let’s go and see what they do for fun around here.”

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Part Six

After leaving Melina’s house, Xander found his feet inexorably drawn towards the Miraduro de Santa Luzia. Spike kept pace with him and they walked in silence through the narrow streets, Spike smoking one cigarette after the other. Xander wanted to ask him about Gabriella, about the tension between them, but he wasn’t sure that Spike would give him an answer, or even if he really wanted one, if Spike was suddenly in a sharing mood. He decided on a different tack. “Have you been in Lisbon before?” he asked.

Spike glanced at him and kept walking, blowing smoke
out into the night air. “Once, but not for a long time. Dru and I came in the 30’s.”

“Has it changed much? I mean, when I was here last year, it kind of felt like it had probably always been like this, but then I’d come across a new building, or a piece of graffiti, and there was the modern world. But it feels like a veneer, you know?”

With a brief smile, Spike nodded. “Yeah, I know. There’s a lot that’s changed since I last visited, but even more that’s hardly altered at all. The Alfama still has all the narrow streets, and the hills and viewpoints, and the endless stairways. Each part of the city has its own flavour, it just changes subtly, with the ebb and flow of the people who live there. You can’t change the geography and the guts of a city. Only nature can do that. But there are superficial changes. It’s like I said, back on the train on the way to London that time: the places I’ve seen – the bar, or café, or shop, might not be there anymore, but there’ll be another just like it opened up 'round the corner, or the corner after that.”

“Is that what you meant about stopping thinking like a human?”
“Partly. This city, it’s got its history built right into the foundations of the buildings. After the great earthquake in the 18th century, they quarried the ruins to build some of the new parts. The lower parts are now built on wooden stilts to keep the buildings above sea level. It means they’ll sway if there's another quake, but not keel over like they did before.”

Xander stopped momentarily, surprised by the implication, before catching back up with Spike. “Just like they do now with some modern buildings in earthquake zones?” he asked.

“I suppose so, although the builders here were just a little bit ahead of the game. Necessity being the mother of not having the city crumble around your ears, the next time nature decides to throw a tantrum.”

“You know a lot about this stuff,” Xander said curiously.

Spike glanced sideways again and shook his head, as if Xander had said something particularly stupid. He flicked the butt of his cigarette into the herb pot on the front step of a nearby house and lit another without breaking his stride. Sighing, Xander realized that the conversation was over.
They walked on, past the shops, cafes and churches that had become almost as familiar to Xander the previous year, as the buildings on the route from his apartment to Revello Drive.

After another five minutes of walking, they broke out of the tangle of buildings and wandered along Rua do Limoeiro towards the viewpoint. The terrace of the Miraduro was peaceful in the dark of the late evening, the tourists long gone, ensconced in the relative safety of the thousands of restaurants and hotels across the city. The sudden freedom from the narrow streets was like a breath of air. Xander noticed Spike’s shoulders start to relax, for the first time since they’d started walking.

They crossed the terrace and came to a halt at the ornately tiled wall that shielded the unwary from the drop below. Xander leaned forward, looking out over the rooftops to the water, before turning round. He leaned back with his hands braced on the wall behind him and gazed up at the ramparts of the Castelo de Sao Jorge, safeguarding the city, just as it had done for centuries. He felt safe with the tangle of the Alfama streets and the sea below, and the weight of the castle
above. With Spike beside him, he felt somehow cocooned and protected from all sides.

He closed his eye for a second, enjoying the quiet, before opening it again and looking directly at Spike. “So, you going to answer my question now, or are you bent on perfecting your Angel impression?”

Git,” Spike said with a snort, settling himself down on the top of the wall. “You wanted to know how I know ‘stuff’ as you so eloquently put it. When you’ve been around as long as I have, you learn things, almost by osmosis. But I’m curious by nature. Vampires aren’t all about killing and chaos, although that has its attractions. The old ones survive because they understand how the human world works. How they fit into that world and how they don’t. You’ve got to learn that.”

Rolling his eye, Xander shoved his hands in the pockets of his pants. “I remember what it was like to be human, Spike. It wasn’t that long ago.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. It’s not about remembering to be like a human. It’s about understanding how to be a vampire. The castle there,”
he waved his cigarette in the air, like a tour guide indicating points of interest to bored tourists. “There are bits of it that date back to the sixth century. Its seen Romans and Visigoths, Crusaders and hordes of Japanese tourists, in its time. It’s crumbled in places and been rebuilt and it’s still here, watching over the comings and goings of this city of explorers. Can you imagine some of the things you built, still being there centuries later? There are vampires and demons here, who’ve seen all that happen. You won’t ever see them, but you can be sure they know we’re in their city.”

Xander pushed himself off the wall and walked forward a few paces, shoulders hunched. He halted by a stone pillar holding up a trellis covered with trailing winter jasmine and reached up, plucking one small yellow flower from the vine. He lifted it to his nose, inhaling its subtle aroma. “Centuries,” he echoed, his eye still fixed on the delicate flower in his hand. “It’s almost unimaginable. I don’t know if I want to.” He turned to find Spike watching him. “Gabriella said that ‘choice’ was the important word. But even though I chose this...this life...this existence... I didn’t really chose.”

“Is that so?” Spike said slowly.
“I’m not Victorian, Spike. I’m modern day engineering. I don’t know if it’s built to last.”

“I think you’ll be surprised. Takes a bit of getting used to, that’s all. But you’re getting there.” Spike looked at the burning butt of his cigarette and pinched the end to extinguish it, before throwing it over the wall, onto the roofs below. “She’s going to die, you know.” he said abruptly. “Not this week, or next, but one day, she’s not going to be around. Just like all the others, she’s going to leave you someday.”

Xander didn’t even pretend not to know who he was talking about. “I know,” he said softly, glancing briefly down at the flower in his hand before putting it carefully in his pocket. He looked back up at Spike. “It scares me. I’ve known her nearly all my life. I don’t know if I can imagine things without her – with her not being around to boss me about, or frown when I cuss and generally keep me in line. But I’m going to have to, aren’t I?”

“Unless you do something stupid, or go for a walk in the sun when it happens, then yeah, you’re going to have to deal with it.”
“Would you let me walk in the sun?”

“Not out of grief, no. If it was what you really wanted, after the grieving was done, then I couldn’t stop you. You’re a big lad, despite the way you act sometimes.” Spike studied his boots for a second before looking up. “I’d probably still try to talk you out of it.”

“Why?” Xander watched as Spike processed the question, then held up his hand. “Actually don’t answer that. Can I ask you another question?”

“Can ask,” Spike replied. He looked indifferent, but Xander could hear the curiosity in his voice.

“How do you feel about Dru?” he began hesitantly. “I know you’re a white hat now, or maybe more of a grey hat,” he paused, thinking. “I guess you could say the same for me. But you helped us last year. You came up with a solution when you could have just fed me to Dru and been done with it. Now we’re here. You’ve got memories of her being here, and in a thousand other places you’ve seen together over the last hundred years. Now she’s back, saying that she wants me, wants both of us, and we’re trying to find something that will block her out. Do you want to stop her?”
Swinging one leg over the edge of the wall, so that it dangled in space, Spike lit another cigarette and stared out over the rooftops. He didn’t speak for a minute and Xander watched the rhythm of his hand, as it rose to his mouth and fell again. The smoke floated on the night air, like the fog Spike had once told him about, from his Victorian youth. “It’s complicated, me and Dru,” he replied eventually. “I worshipped the ground she walked on, but I’ve always known I came second. Not just to the great Irish plonker, but to what Dru wanted. I’d find a nice spot on a Greek island to settle for a while, then she’d hear a tale of some tribe in the Amazon that caught her fancy and she’d be away. I’d always follow. I got tired of following.”

“Is that why you offered to turn me?” Xander could hear the need in his own voice and hated himself for it, but he ploughed on, determined to know. “So that it would be your chance to lead?”

“Maybe. Seemed like the only option at the time. When your back’s against the wall, you deal with the fallout when it happens.”

Crossing the few feet that separated them, Xander
pushed himself up onto the top of the wall, facing Spike. “What if we can’t find the book?” he asked. “Or what if it doesn’t have the answers we’re looking for? What if we have to go after Dru? Would you do it?”

Spike’s hand rose and fell, cigarette moving like an off kilter metronome, keeping time with his thoughts and his moods. “Like I said, pet. When you’ve run out of options, you have to do what you have to do. Why don’t we cross that bridge when we come to it, yeah?”

“I’m beginning to feel like all our bridges might be burning. What Gabriella said tonight, about the magic we triggered when I was turned...?”

“Didn’t trigger it. Just built on what was already there. Made it sing through your veins. Now Dru can sing to you.”

“So why now?” Xander pulled his legs up until his feet were flat on the top of the wall, his chin resting on his knees. “Why didn’t she try before?”

Spike shrugged. “Who knows. It’s like asking why she decided to make a game of you before. You caught her fancy and she wanted to play. She was probably off
licking her wounds, after she lost the last game, and now she’s back for a second round. Could have happened six months ago, could have happened ten years from now. With Dru, you never know. Maybe she was bored and wanted some entertainment.”

“You’re not exactly being comforting.”

“Not my job to be comforting. You knew that before and you damn well know it now. I’ll be here for you, but I won’t lie to you.”

Xander raised his head and gazed out to the water far below, the wind from the sea blowing his hair away from his face. “Yeah, I know. Thank you.”

“You’re saying that a lot tonight.”

"I know. Annoying isn’t it?"

“Yeah.”

Xander was pondering whether he could be bothered thinking of a witty retort, when a low ringing from his pocket caught his attention. He swung both legs back on to the terrace side of the wall, pulled out his phone
and pushed the call button.

“Hello,” he said. “Melina. Yeah, I’m fine. We’re up at the viewpoint. Yes, that one. Yes, I’m predictable.” He paused, frowning as he listened to her speak. “Yeah, okay. I know where it is. No, don’t. Stay there. Please, stay in the house with Gabriella. We’ll just scope out the place for now, see what the lay of the land is.”

Xander shut the phone, shoved it back into his pocket and looked at Spike, who was now slouched back against the wall, one leg bent and his foot flat against the elaborate tiles that decorated the surface of the wall.

“That was your girl? Got something to tell you?”

“She just had a call from one of her contacts in the city. Our dirty little chaos mage, Tiago, has been spotted coming back into town. Since that’s who I got the first book from, it would probably be worth seeing what he’s got to say for himself.”

“And here’s you promising that you’d only go for a look see. I think I’m corrupting you.”
Xander snorted. “I’ve been lying since I was old enough to know how to use it to my advantage, Spike. That’s one thing you don’t get to take credit for.”

“Maybe I’ll just have to think of something else. Corruption is my middle name.”

“Right,” Xander drawled. “And here I was thinking it was Algernon.”

"I’m not the special-ed one here, pet. Less of your lip now, or I’ll do what any good Sire would do and put you over my knee.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Keep it up, bleach boy, and I’ll tell Gabriella you were nasty to me. Melina too.”

“Little bastard,” Spike muttered under his breath, but Xander heard him just fine. “Right then, enough mucking about.” He straightened up and rubbed his hands together, looking every inch like a child who’d been promised a trip to the candy store. "Let’s go create a little chaos of our own.”

**Part Seven**
The lights at the front of an ancient monastery lit up the empty square. Xander skirted the edge, keeping near to the crumbling walls, his eye fixed on the narrow lane running up the side of the shadowed cloisters. “Are you sure you know where you’re going? “Spike murmured at his back.

“I’m sure. Remember, I’ve been here before, when I collected the first book.” Xander glanced briefly back at Spike before continuing. “Although that time, I actually came to help Melina confront Tiago and warn him off chasing Rosanna. My role was to look menacing and glower a lot.”

“Yeah?” Spike chuckled quietly. “How’d that work out for you?”

“It worked,” Xander muttered, just a hint of indignation in his voice. “I can glower with the best of them, when I’m properly motivated. It helped that Tiago’s got a spine that would embarrass a jelly fish. The only person I’ve seen cave quicker, is Willy, so that gives you a benchmark for weaseliness.”

“Nice.”
“It was only once we’d done the threatening that I realised that he was the same person I needed to see about the book. It was kind of serendipity, if you believe in that sort of thing, which I don’t.”

“There’s another $100 word. The Watcher would be proud of you, pet.”

Xander stopped, his hand splayed against the worn stone of the ancient walls. He took a deep breath, forcing down the shudder that threatened. “I hope so,” he said softly and continued his cautious approach to Tiago’s workshop. Spike, every inch the predator, stalked silently behind him.

Pausing in front of a small door set back in the wall, Xander turned and looked at Spike. “This is where the little shit does his day to day work. There’s a workshop out front, where he carries out his legitimate business.” He glanced down at his feet, then back up at Spike, a small smile on his lips. “Kind of reminded me of the Magic Box, but less organised, and not so much with the white hat central. He also has a few private rooms in the back. He may be a spineless weasel, which is a really disturbing image, but I wouldn’t put it past him to have a few tricks up his sleeve. I guess the main
thing is that weasels can be pretty dangerous when cornered.”

“That’s true. There was this one time, when Dru…” Spike stopped at Xander’s look and held up his hands. “Okay, not the time. I know. So our bloke is just back in town and probably not expecting company. We might just catch him on the fly.”

“We can hope, but don’t hold your breath.” Spike raised an eyebrow and Xander rubbed at his eye patch distractedly. “Okay, you know what I mean. Old habits die hard.”

“Chaos mages die even harder, so let’s see what we can do to help him take a step in the right direction.”

Xander just knew there was a whole range of lurid scenarios running through Spike’s head, soul or no soul. “Spike, we’re to check out the place and, if he’s here, get some information. No killing. Melina would be pissed, and I don’t want to think what Gabriella will say.”

Spike rolled his shoulders, as if he was preparing for a fight, before grinning at Xander’s expression. “Alright,
pet, have it your way. Spoil all my fun.”

With an exasperated shake of his head, Xander started to turn away when Spike grabbed him by the shoulder. “The little creep doesn’t need to know that we generally play nice, now does he?” he said with a wicked grin.

Xander paused, his eye widening as he realised what Spike was saying. He nodded slowly before turning around. He grasped the handle of the door and turned it sharply. The door swung inwards on oiled hinges, revealing the low lighting of a shop in its nighttime state. It looked empty, but as he stepped across the threshold, Xander could hear a heartbeat coming from somewhere at the rear. He raised a finger to indicate one person. Spike rolled his eyes and nodded, pushing by Xander to step further into the room. Xander followed and looked around. The workshop did remind him of the Magic Shop, in so far as the walls were lined with glass jars, vials and pottery dishes, just made for pounding herbs and mixing potions, but it was smaller, seedier and less cared for. It didn’t have a Giles to look after it. Xander dug his nails hard into his palms and continued his survey. There were old leather bound books on one small bookcase, obviously for public
consumption. Xander was pretty sure that Tiago’s library, behind the scenes, was much more extensive.

He started when Spike touched his arm and indicated the beaded curtain at the back of the workshop. “Git’s got a bead curtain,” Spike muttered in his ear. “He really does deserve to die.”

Chuckling quietly, Xander gestured for Spike to go ahead and followed on behind. Somehow he knew that Spike would part the curtain, like he was entering a wild-west saloon. He wasn’t disappointed. Hearing the strings of beads clatter against each other, he decided that there was no point in stealth and duplicated Spike’s move. He had to admit that it felt kind of cool, but he’d deny it if Spike ever brought it up.

The narrow hallway beyond had two doors off to the left and one to the right. All the doors were slightly ajar, as if inviting guests to enter, but Spike nodded to the second on the left and strode forward. He kicked hard at the flimsy timber, slamming it into the wall, before walking through, shoulders back, arms loose at his side, ready for battle. Xander followed, content with a less dramatic entrance.
Tiago sat behind a long wooden desk, at the far end of the room, a precarious pile of hidebound ledgers and an old adding machine at his elbow. His hair was light brown, fading towards grey, and his skin had a sallow, stretched look over his face, that spoke of too few days in the sun and the abuse of far too much magic. He looked exactly as Xander remembered.

He stood up slowly, but didn’t move from the shelter of his desk as Spike and Xander walked further into the room.

“Hello Tiago,” Xander said.

“Gentlemen,” Tiago replied with a smile. Xander had seen friendlier smiles on sharks. “To what do I owe this pleasure? Unfortunately my workshop is closed, but I’d be glad to assist you if you would like to make an appointment.”

“Not really one for appointments,” Xander replied. He glanced over at Spike, who had taken up position on his left, within line of sight of the main door and a smaller, narrower door in the corner, that was half hidden by a faded tapestry. Spike fiddled with his Zippo, running it through his fingers like some management toy, but his
feet were apart, his back was straight and his eyes gleamed with the promise of violence. Xander took a breath and straightened his own back, imagining the weight of Spike’s duster settling on his shoulders, mentally clothing himself to complement Spike’s physical threat. He glanced back at Tiago and smiled. It wasn’t a pleasant smile. “Old acquaintances don’t need appointments, do they Tiago? And if you don’t want visitors, you should really learn to lock your front door. You never know what kind of unsavory types might be out at this time of night”.

Tiago flinched, glancing from Xander to Spike and back again, as if trying to decide who was the greater threat. “Mr… Mr Harris, isn’t it?” he stuttered. “Yes, that’s right, that’s right. Things have obviously changed in the last year. You’re moving in new circles, now, by the looks of it.”

Xander shrugged. “Same circles, different direction. I should introduce you to my Sire. You might have heard of him. Spike, also known as William the Bloody, meet Tiago, also known as spineless weasel. Tiago, meet Spike.”

Nodding, Tiago rubbed his hands down the front of his
shirt. Xander could see the trail of sweat left on the grubby fabric. “Yes, yes, of course. So what can I do for you?”

Strolling forward, Xander came to a stop at the right hand side of the desk and hitched up one hip, to perch on the corner. He knew without looking that Spike had moved in behind him. “We’ve come about a book. You remember the book from last year, Tiago? The one about the family magic? Well, guess what? There was a second one that you never told me about. Spike here picked it up in Venice.”

“Very resourceful of him, I’m sure.” Tiago replied, his smile becoming wider and more false by the second. “All’s well that ends well, as Shakespeare would say.”

“Not quite, mate.” Spike wandered a few steps to the side and leaned casually against the opposite corner of the desk. “See, the thing is, we’ve now discovered there’s a third book. One that might be kind of useful. We’re thinking that you might know something about that, so we thought we’d pay a call, and ask you all nicely.” Spike looked over at Xander. “See, I can do nice. That was nice, right?”
“That was really nice, I’m impressed,” Xander replied before turning his attention back to Tiago. “Since Spike’s taken the trouble to dust down his manners, it would probably be good for you to help him out. What do you think, Tiago?”

“And if I can’t?” The chaos mage pushed his chair back, giving himself room to manoeuvre. Xander slid off the edge of the desk and Spike straightened in response to his move.

“I think that’s more like 'if you won’t'?” Xander replied.

“Won’t is such a strong word, Mr Harris. You see the position you’ve put me in. I had plans for the original book, but you came in here with that harridan, making your demands, and even when I capitulated, you took the merchandise from me by force.”

Taking one step to the right, Xander moved around the side of the desk. “I paid you for it, remember.”

Tiago opened his mouth, as if to reply, but closed it again, obviously thinking better of it.

Xander took another step forward and smiled.
“Remember, Tiago, we’ve got Willow on our side. You’ve heard of Willow, haven’t you? She’s probably the most powerful witch on the planet, at the moment. She’s also my best friend. Do you want me to call her? Because I can. If you’d like?” Xander stuck his hand in his jacket pocket and dug out his cell phone. “See, I’ve got her on speed dial and everything.”

“But, but, you’re working for the other side, now. Aren’t you?” Tiago asked cautiously.

“Like I said, same circles, just a different direction. But Willow’s been my best friend since I was a kid. She’s got a weakness for me, you know? It’s kind of useful, if you get my drift. It’s amazing how easy it is to play the human, when it’s necessary.”

“Yes, yes, I understand. I can see how that could be very useful.” Tiago nodded enthusiastically.

“So tell me, before I lose my manners and Spike remembers he doesn’t have any.”

“Okay, okay. I sold it to a scholar. A priest. He wanted it. I sent it. He paid me. End of story.”
“And this scholar would be where, exactly?”

“He’s at a school. In England. In the north, I think. I’m not familiar with the geography of such a nasty cold country. But I think it was one of those big, private schools, where the teachers are clergy. That’s all I know.”

“Seems to me you’ve got all these ledgers. You’re too smart to lose track of things, Tiago.” Spike snapped his Zippo open and shut, open and shut, the clicking sounded loud in the tense silence. “So you can either look in your books and find us the answers we need, or I can break every bone in your body and burn this place around your ears.” He paused, head tilted as if thinking. “In fact, I might let my boy, here, do the breaking. He’s coming along nicely, but needs to work on his technique. He’s still a bit messy. No finesse, if you know what I mean. But he’s a quick learner.”

“There’s no need for threats,” Tiago replied hastily. “You are right, of course. I was forgetting he would have given me his address, so I could send the book to him. My memory, it’s not what it was, you understand. Please, indulge me while I look for it.” He bent down, opening a desk drawer and began to rummage through
a stack of papers, pens, coins and other clutter inside. He glanced furtively up at Xander and smiled as he started to withdraw his hand. His fist was clenched, but before he could open it, Spike dropped his Zippo on the desk and grabbed Tiago’s wrist, twisting it until the chaos mage opened his fingers and a small stone statue of a two-faced man fell onto the wooden surface with a thump.

“Not nice, Tiago,” Spiked growled and twisted Tiago’s wrist a little tighter. “Not nice at all,” he repeated. “Though I’ve got to give you points for trying. No point in being a mage if you can’t use your mojo in a tight spot, is there?” Spike let go and Tiago hissed and rubbed at the angry, reddened skin.

“I’m glad you appreciate my position,” Tiago said, his tone wavering between bitter and obsequious.

“Course we do. So now that we’ve got the theatrics out of the way and established the pecking order, good and proper, maybe we can get some service and we’ll all be happy.”

“As you say.” Tiago gave his wrist a final rub before pulling out the ledger that was second from the top of
the pile. Thumbing through it, page by page, he stopped and tapped a finger on an entry near the bottom. “There,” he said. “That’s who I sent the book to. I’ll write it down for you and you can be on your way, yes?”

“No need to bother, mate.” Spike pulled the ledger out of Tiago’s hand and ripped the page out of its binding. “There you are. See, that was easy, wasn’t it?” Spike studied the paper for a second, then glanced over at Xander. “Looks like a trip back to Blighty is in order. Haven’t been to the north in years.”

Xander grinned and turned his attention back to Tiago. “Now that we’ve got that out of the way, there’s just one more thing. A little word of warning, from one acquaintance to another. I might be the evil undead now, but Melina’s the one you really have to be scared of. She’s got some powerful friends, and she still remembers your nasty little obsession with her daughter.”

“Oh yes, the fair Rosanna. Such a beautiful girl. So, toothsome, you might say. I’m sure you two gentlemen will appreciate the pun.”
Xander’s hand shot out, grabbing Tiago by the front of his jacket before the chaos mage could move. “Do you see me laughing, Tiago?” He tightened his grip, hauling Tiago up, until he was almost on his tiptoes. “Well, do you?” he repeated. Tiago shook his head, his breath hitching as Xander loomed over him.

“No, no,” Tiago replied. “You misunderstand, I was joking, yes?”

Xander loosened his grip and Tiago settled back with his feet firmly on the ground. He flicked a quick glance to the small statue, abandoned on the desk top and Xander tensed, ready for an escape attempt, or another trick. “Don’t even think it,” he said softly.

“Or what?” Tiago replied resentfully. He squared his shoulders and looked Xander in the eye. “You come in here, making your demands, and even after you get what you want, you’re still threatening me.”

Xander took one step backwards, suddenly shocked at how easy it had been to slip into the skin of his darker emotions. He knew his mask had only slipped for a moment, but it was enough and Tiago took a matching step forward, a shark scenting blood.
“Cat got your tongue?” he asked almost tenderly. "Or, maybe daddy’s got your tongue?” His eyes flicked to Spike and back to Xander, a salacious grin on his face. “I’m sure daddy would be only too willing to fight for you, if you’re not willing to face Janus on your own. Or maybe we should call in his Sire? I’m sure she’d be glad to lend a hand.”

Spike moved swiftly from the corner of the desk and slid in behind Tiago, whispering in his ear. “What do you know about Drusilla, you little bastard?”

Tiago tried to turn towards the threat, but Xander shook himself out of his momentary torpor and grabbed him by the front of his grubby shirt, pulling him back around. “What do you know?” he echoed Spike’s question.

“Know?”Tiago almost crooned. “I know lots of things? I know enough to keep a crazy vampire happy. I know enough to kick people, right where it matters. You’re moving in a different direction now, so you’ll understand. You do what you have to, to get what you want. Liberating, isn’t it? I know how to get what I want. And if I don’t, then I know how to make it hurt.”
“What do you mean? What did you do, Tiago?” Xander moved his grip from Tiago’s shirt to his hair, shaking him, as if he could shake the truth loose.

Tiago’s smile got wider and Xander stilled, as he saw the exact moment the chaos mage decided he had nothing left to lose. The shark morphed back to weasel and the weasel bared its teeth.

“That bitch’s precious little girl. Her Rosanna. Screamed like a banshee and bled like a stuck pig, I heard.”

Xander’s head swam as Tiago’s words crashed over him, small waves getting higher and higher, until he felt like he was drowning.

Tiago leaned closer, whispering almost conspiratorially. “Pity really, I would only have made her bleed, just a little bit, and she’d have screamed in pleasure, but you had to come meddling. You and the she-wolf. So it’s really your fault.”

Xander saw red.
He shoved Tiago hard against the wall and the chaos mage struggled as Xander’s human features melted away, leaving only the demon. Xander could smell Tiago’s fear, see every pore, oozing with sweat, hear his heartbeat, jack hammering in his chest.

Digging his fingers deeper into Tiago’s hair, Xander leaned down until his face was inches from Tiago's. “You turned Dru on Rosanna,” he growled. “Your fault she’s dead. Your fault Melina’s been grieving. Your fault that Dru started her killing here.”

Tiago wriggled like a fish on the end of a hook, pushing at Xander’s chest, as if his strength was any match for the demon. “I loved her,” he cried. “But she wouldn’t talk to me. I wanted to make her understand.” He looked wildly at Spike, who stood to the side, one shoulder leaning against the wall, watching calmly.

Xander snarled and wrapped his free hand around Tiago’s throat.
“She was beautiful. I wanted to touch her. You wouldn’t let me touch her,” Tiago wailed.

“You fuck. You killed her. Pointed Dru at her. You might as well have killed her yourself.” Tightening his grip around Tiago’s throat, Xander squeezed, grinning when he heard the chaos mage start to wheeze and frantic fingers scrabbled at his hand. “See how you like it. See how it feels.” Xander leant forward, his fangs scrapping the edge of Tiago’s ear. “Do you think it will hurt Tiago? Shall I make it hurt? Make you feel like Rosanna must have felt?”

Beating his hands uselessly against Xander’s shoulders, Tiago screamed thinly, unable to get breath under the pressure of the hand at his throat. The smell of urine filled the room, but Xander held firm, a picture of Rosanna crystallising in his mind – her small, tanned feet clad in summer sandals, her school uniform pristine, in black, white and red, and her dark hair caressing her shoulders, hiding the ragged, red ruin of the jagged wound on her neck.

“See you in hell, fucker,” he roared.
He struck down, letting his hate guide him, like a beacon in the roiling sea of his emotions, teeth rending flesh, as Tiago keened and writhed in his iron grip. The blood was intoxicating – hot and spicy, laced with something intangible that could only be the magic that the mage absorbed and dispersed with every spell. The heat, and the taste, and the power coursed over Xander’s tongue, coating his throat, and it screamed through his body as Tiago’s heart began to stutter and fail. One last struggle, one last deep draught and it was done.

Tearing his fangs out of Tiago’s throat, Xander raised his head, eye wide open and mouth dripping with blood. He met Spike’s impassive gaze. “So that’s what it’s like,” he whispered. “That’s how you felt, for one hundred years?”

Spike nodded, eyes gleaming as he shifted, letting his demon come to the fore. He lifted his hand and ran his thumb across Xander’s lips, smearing the blood, and raised it to his own mouth. He lapped delicately. “That’s what it’s like.”

Dropping Tiago’s body, Xander ignored the dull, wet thud as the head hit the wooden floor and took a quick
stride to get in Spike’s face, shoving him hard up against the wall. One hundred years of brawling helped Spike absorb the impact and he came back, grabbing Xander by the shoulders and pivoting until Xander was pinned against the brickwork.

“You want to play, pet? Think you’re a big boy now?” Spike chuckled and loosened his grip, allowing Xander to spin them again.

“Bastard,” Xander growled. “Son of a whore.”

“Just words, pet,” Spike taunted.

“Not your pet.”

“What are you then?”

“Whatever you made me.” Xander shoved one hand into Spike’s hair, his other pushing hard on Spike's shoulder, until they were pressed full length against each other.

“Did you feel the blood, pet?” Spike murmured in his ear. “Did you hear it singing in his veins? Calling to you?”
“Shut up.” Xander’s unneeded breath hitched as Spike moved his hips.

“Make me.”

Using his greater height to keep Spike pinned against the wall, Xander bent his head, smashing their mouths together. “My boys,” a voice whispered in his head. He felt Spike’s tongue caressing the edge of one fang and shuddered as Spike trailed his hands slowly up under Xander’s shirt, knuckles dragging against soft, vulnerable skin. “My pretty boys.”

After the longest moment, Spike reached Xander’s shoulders, grabbing hard and spun them again, so that Xander was sprawled against the wall, legs wide, panting, his eye fixed on Spike. On his Sire. “Will you walk into my parlour?' said the spider to the fly.”

“Still not your pet,” Xander gasped and Spike chuckled, fangs flashing as he moved between Xander’s legs, capturing his mouth again, until there was only the sensation of tongues, the scent of blood, leather and heady arousal, and the sweet, sweet pressure of rough denim against his cock as they rutted and groaned.
“Blood and bones, bones and blood..that’s what pretty boys are made of.” Tiago’s blood pounded through his body, “Bleed for me...Die for me...Come for me...” and he felt his orgasm roar through him. Throwing his head back, Xander wailed as Spike struck, embedding his fangs in Xander’s neck.

Xander felt his legs wobble and he braced against Spike’s shoulders, holding himself upright as Spike withdrew his fangs. Shuddering, Xander looked down at the stained front of his pants and at Spike’s matching pair, before looking up. “Can you hear the heart beat? Hoof beat. Drum beat. Can you hear it calling?”

Spike’s demon face melted away to reveal a sardonic grin and the inevitable quirked eyebrow. “Well that shut me up,” he drawled.

Xander glared at his Sire, lifting his hand to finger the wound on his neck. “Two pretty boys. Light and dark. Night and day. All bound together with scarlet ribbons and blood.” Pulling his finger away, he stared at the blood and then down at Tiago’s abandoned rag-doll body, sprawled on the floor by his desk. His eye darted from the body, to the blood on his finger, to Spike, and back to the body. The voice in his head melted to
mocking laughter and he pushed himself off the wall, shoved Spike out of the way and bolted from the office.

He ran.

He ran as if every demon who’d ever tried to take over the Hellmouth was at his heels. He ran like he had one more chance to save Buffy, and Dawn, and Giles, and Andrew, and every slayer and stranger who’d ever died on his watch. He ran, flying by fresh graffiti and ancient buildings, pounding along narrow alleys and up steep stairways, dodging startled late night tourists and ignoring the catcalls and invitations from girls and boys standing on corners, looking for trade.

He ran until the laughter in his head started to fade and he finally stopped, collapsing on a stone bench in front of an old, dry fountain in a small abandoned courtyard. Leaning back, he closed his eye, reliving Tiago’s taunting words, the taste of magic laced blood and the feel of Spike’s fangs in his neck as he came. He opened his eye, desperate to escape the images in his head and looked around for the first time since he’d stopped running. He sobbed as he realised that he was in the courtyard where he’d found Rosanna, his mad flight guiding him, like a homing pigeon, to the source of all
of his pain. Hanging his head, he stared at the cracks in the concrete at his feet and wished that the ground would open up and swallow him whole.

He had no idea how long he sat there, but after a time he was dimly aware of the sound of singing coming from a window high above him. Looking up, he saw the silhouette of a woman, standing by some open shutters. Her voice was plaintive and haunting, and her song hung in the night breeze like autumn mist. He didn’t understand the words, but the rhythm and the tone had its own language, and he put his head in his hands and lost himself in the sounds of love, and longing, and loss. The music curled around his tainted soul and he grieved for the people he had lost, and the monster he knew he had become.

The thud of heavy boots coming nearer acted as a counterpoint to the song. Xander smelled old leather and fresh cigarettes, as Spike approached along the narrow alley and entered the courtyard. Keeping his head down, Xander tried to recapture the feeling that would let him drown in the music, blotting everything else out, until there was nothing left but the singer and the song.
“It’s called Fado,” Spike murmured as Xander felt him settle on the bench beside him. “Was born right here in the Alfama. It’s the sound of Lisbon lamenting. You can probably hear a dozen songs just like it, on a night like this – Fadonistas singing in dark clubs and open windows, performing for tourists and aficionados and themselves. It’s the soundtrack of the city – its poems, and its heartaches and its history, come to life. You should ask Melina about Fado.”

Xander raised his head as the song drew to an end. He heard the clatter of shutters closing out the night and the uninvited listeners. He stared straight ahead, visualising a small body lying on the cold ground in front of him.

“Why did you let me do it, Spike?”

“Let you?” Spike questioned.

“Killing Tiago, why did you let me? You could have stopped it.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe? But you didn’t.”
“No.” Spike pulled out a cigarette, and his Zippo, and stared at them for a second, before lighting up and looking back over at Xander. “No, I didn’t,” he repeated. “You’re a vampire, Xander.”

“I know I’m a vampire.”

“Do you?”

“It was a lesson?” Xander asked incredulously.

“Not a planned one. You’ve spent the last year grieving, and that’s fine. But I’ve told you before, you’ve got to stop thinking like a human. Soul or no soul, sooner or later you needed to know how it felt. Drinking from the tap. Feeling a heart slow and weaken. Feeling the power and the strength running through you. You’re so bloody strong as it is. Strong enough to survive and not buckle under. Strong enough to die. But you have to understand how strong you are now. How strong you can be.” He leaned back against the edge of the fountain. “So no, I didn’t plan it, but I wasn’t going to stop you once you’d started. Not this time.”

Xander pushed himself off the stone bench and stared
up at the shuttered window where the singer had stood. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he shook his head. “I didn’t want this, Spike. I didn’t want to be different. I was happy being normal. I’ve been kidding myself that nothing had changed. That I had a soul, and I hadn’t killed, so that meant I was still me. But it’s a lie. I’ve changed. I’m a killer. Just another monster, driven by bloodlust, and power, and hate.”

Easing himself off the bench, Spike stood at Xander’s back, close enough to touch. He kept his hands by his sides for a second, before laying one gently on Xander’s shoulder. “Nothing wrong with hate,” he said softly. “Properly directed, it’s a powerful weapon and I’m all for it. Tiago deserved your hate and he deserved to die. Just don’t hate yourself. You don’t deserve it.”

“She was in my head, Spike. Dru – I could hear her. Calling. Whispering. I enjoyed it – the feeling of power, of hate, and Tiago struggling. She was in my head, afterwards, when we... when we did what we did. She knew, and she was laughing.” Xander felt the tremors start to run through his body and he jerked his hands back out of his jacket. A small yellow flower, a passive passenger to the violent motion, fluttered to the ground and lay crumbled on the concrete. Xander
wrapped his arms around himself, as if he could stop himself coming apart at the seams. He shut his eye again, letting himself fall into the memory of the Fadonista’s song and his heart shattered under the weight of his grief, and his fear, and his hate.

Spike stood behind him, hand resting lightly on his shoulder, giving him strength as he wept. *If any one is interested in knowing more about Fado, which is an amazing art form, check out this clip of Mariza, one of the foremost Fado singers in Portugal today. Here she's singing* Primavera

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88yCqVos-UI&feature=related

**Part Nine**

Dawn was approaching and the first rays of the early winter sun glowed faintly on the horizon. Xander walked slowly along the narrow, twisting streets, ignoring his surroundings, ignoring the threat from the encroaching light, ignoring Spike.

“Melina’s going to be worried,” Spike said conversationally. “Bet she’s been outside watching the sun. Mother hen, that one.”
Xander walked on.

“Gabriella, too. Bet she’s fretting. Not about me. She’ll be worried about you, even if she doesn’t say it out loud.” Spike sighed and took a long draw on his cigarette before continuing, “You’re going to have to talk to me sometime. Not like I haven’t seen you cry before. Reckon I’ve seen you at your lowest. I’ve been right down there with you, a time or two. I’m not going to hold it against you.”

Xander glanced sideways, never breaking stride, before looking straight ahead again, his eyes fixed on the last set of shallow steps at the end of the narrow street and the yellow door that had once signalled laughter, and safety, and comfort. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever find comfort again. He wasn’t sure he deserved to.

Taking the final steps two at a time, Spike overtook Xander and pitched his fag into the gutter with a flourish. He knocked sharply on the door and shot a glance back at Xander, who had paused at the top of the stairs. The first fingers of sunlight lit up the city at his back. Spike turned around at the sound of a key turning in the lock in the quiet of the early morning, then Melina stood on the threshold, echoing her stance
from the night before. She pulled the door wide and stepped to the side.

“Come in, I was worried,” she scolded, swatting Xander lightly on the shoulder when he followed Spike into the hall. “Two, so-called, responsible adults, leaving it to the last minute to get out of the sun. Anyone would think you had a death wish.”

Xander stopped dead at her words. In the blink of an eye, he turned and lunged back for the door, just as the sun lit up the pavement beyond. He was quick, but Spike was quicker, grabbing the back of his coat collar with one hand and his elbow with the other, hauling him back into the dim light of the cool hallway.

“No, you don’t,” Spike growled in his ear. “Told you last night, I’ll only let you do that if you make a proper decision. But not like this.”

Xander struggled for a second before slumping in Spike’s grasp. He nodded in resignation, keeping his eyes on the ground.

“Xander,” Melina exclaimed. “Xander, look at me.” It was a mother’s voice, brooking no argument. Xander
looked up, his eyes skittering along the pictures on the wall and the knick-knacks on the hall table, before coming to rest on Melina’s face. His shoulders were hunched and his coat collar was up, the ends of his hair spilling over the edge. He didn’t speak.

Melina glanced at Spike and Xander felt, more than saw, Spike shake his head. She looked behind her and Xander followed the movement, noticing Gabriella for the first time, standing at the end of the hallway by the kitchen door. Her hair was down and she’d shed her jacket, but she still looked effortlessly put together. Not at all like someone who was up in the early hours and probably hadn’t been to bed.

“Come in to the kitchen,” Melina said. "The shutters are closed.” She turned and walked down the short hall towards Gabriella, who stepped into the kitchen without speaking. Spike placed a hand between Xander’s shoulders, making him walk forward, Spike at his back.

When they entered the kitchen, Gabriella was sitting at the far end of the table, the door to the sun room behind her. Melina stood in front of the dresser, the photo of her and Xander that Rosanna had taken the
previous summer, perched on the shelf behind her left shoulder. Xander didn’t know if her positioning was intentional, or accidental, but it made his stomach roll.

Dragging a chair out from the table, Spike pushed Xander down, before leaning against the sink, his back to the shuttered window. The position had a clear view of all the occupants of the room and both doors.

“Are you going to tell me what that was about?” Melina asked. Gabriella leaned forward, her clasped hands resting on the table in front of her.

Xander kept silent, but his fingers restlessly traced the grain of the wooden table top.

“Alright,” Melina said slowly. “Let’s try something else. Did you see Tiago?”

Xander glanced over at Spike, then quickly at Melina and Gabriella, before fixing his gaze on the wall somewhere to the right of Melina’s head. He didn’t look at the photos.

“What’s wrong?” Melina asked sharply. “What happened?”
“What makes you think something happened, pet?”

“Don’t be obtuse, Spike, something obviously happened,” Gabriella said tersely. “You both nearly missed dawn. Xander tried to run into the sunlight. Now you’re being obstructive. Not that that is new. You might as well tell us, because neither of you are leaving this room until you do. So let’s start again and answer Melina’s questions. Did you see Tiago?”

“He’s dead,” Xander said softly. “I killed him.”

“What?” Melina slid into the seat opposite him and reached out, as if to grasp his hands, but he pulled them away and clasped them in his lap, out of reach. “What happened?” she asked.

He shook his head, refusing to look at her. “Xander,” she tried again. “What do you mean, you killed him?”

“I told you what happened. He’s dead.” He could feel the anger building inside him and almost taste Tiago’s blood coating his tongue.

“But there has to be more to it than that.” Gabriella sat
back in her chair frowning. “You went to check his movements and, if appropriate, approach him for information. What changed?”


He stared first at Gabriella and then across at Melina, noting every scent and hitch of breath, sensing anger, pity, confusion and fear. He strangled a laugh when he realised that the smell of fear was mainly his own.

A round of applause cut the silence and Spike slouched further back against the sink, watching him, the hint of a grin dancing at the corner of his mouth. “Well, that was a show and a half. Going to sit down now and put on your party manners? Or have you got something planned for an encore?”

Xander glared at him balefully and Spike looked pointedly at the empty chair Xander had vacated. With a growl, Xander pushed the demon down and
deliberately shoved the chair into the table edge. He stepped back and stood in the doorway, his hands shoved in his coat pockets, fingers opening and closing, like a dog chasing rabbits in its sleep. The force of the movement pulled his coat collar down.

Spike chuckled. “So now we’ve done the show, maybe we can get to the tell part of the proceedings. Tiago’s dead. Little bastard deserved to die. He got what he deserved.”

“That’s not a tell, Spike,” Gabriella said irritably. “That’s an abstract. A little more detail would be appreciated.”

“We went to ask about the book. After a bit of persuasion, the little bastard told us that he sold it to some scholar, at a posh school up north, in England.” He dug into the pocket of his duster and pulled out a torn bit of paper. “The mage might have been a slimy little shit, but he kept good records of all his transactions. Our buyer is based at Ampleforth, just a bit north of York. Haven’t been there for a long time.” He tilted his head as if he was recalling a good memory. “Might even get a day or two at the races while we’re in the area.”
“As edifying as this is, Spike, I have no interest in your recreational plans. Get to the point.”

“I’ll tell you what happened.” Turning his attention away from Gabriella, Spike looked at Melina. “That bastard killed your little girl.”

“What?” Melina jumped to her feet, pushing herself away from the table, her eyes fixed on Spike. Gabriella moved more slowly as she rose and moved around to stand at Melina’s shoulder. “Rosanna died from a vampire attack,” Melina said softly. “A vicious vampire attack. Xander told me it was probably Drusilla. I saw the wounds. I buried her. You weren’t here.”

“No I wasn’t. You’re right, she was attacked and bitten. But you don’t blame the bullet, or the gun, for someone’s death; you blame the person that pulled the trigger. The mage was obsessed with your girl. He thought he was in love with her. At least, in lust. He didn’t like being told he couldn’t touch the bright and shiny he was after.” Spike’s eyes flicked to Xander, then back to the women. “Didn’t like being strong armed. Decided that he wanted to get his own back. If he couldn’t have her, then nobody was going to.”
“So he made a deal with a master vampire to kill her? He made a deal?” Melina asked faintly. She swayed and Gabriella pushed her back down into her chair.


“She was here because of me,” Xander said quietly, his eyes fixed on the wooden floor at his feet. “She was looking for a place to start her game. Tiago gave her the perfect opening move. He pointed Dru at Rosanna, then stood back and watched the chaos.” He looked up at Melina. “So it’s my fault. I killed her really.”

“No you didn’t,” Spike cut in.

“Guilt by association,” Xander replied. His stomach flipped and he felt like he’d eaten something sour. “I might as well have bitten her myself. Her and Elena. The couple on the train, and Ginny and Maureen at the station. The man in Oxford. Andrew and Dawn, Giles and Buffy. They’re all my fault.”

“We’ve been over this,” Spike said sharply. “Time after bloody time. I’m tired of hearing about it. The self flagellation stops now. Dru killed them. Dru’s game.
Dru’s rules.”

“Spike, I don’t think this is the time,” Gabriella started.

Glaring, Spike pushed himself off the sink, hooked a kitchen chair with one foot and pulled it towards him, spinning it round and straddling it, his arms folded along the top of the backrest. “This is exactly the time. He’s been grieving for the last year. Going over every moment. Wondering if there was something he could have done differently, that would have changed the outcome. I’ve let him do it. So has the Witch. But this is one step too far. Dru killed your girl, but Tiago gave her a target. Like I said, I’m sorry for your loss, but we can’t bring her back. We persuaded the mage to give us the information about the book and he stared gloating about the girl. Thought we’d be applauding the family exploits. He wanted to stir the pot and used Dru to do it. She had her own reasons for allowing herself to be used. So blame Tiago. Blame Dru. But don’t lay blame where it doesn’t belong. Don’t feed his guilt complex.”

“None of this changes the fact that I killed Tiago.” Xander said, rubbing absently at the side of his neck. “You can’t say that I’m not to blame for that.”
“I never said you didn’t do it. Just don’t blame you. Good, bloody riddance to him. Fucking chaos mages are a menace. Never met one that wasn’t better off dead. I won’t mourn him. Neither should any of you.”

Gabriella studied Xander’s face, as if searching for a reaction to Spike’s declaration, before looking back at Spike. You let him do it.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Yes,” Spike replied steadily.

“Then you bit him,” she continued.

“Well, sometimes a relationship is a bit more complicated than a coffee and a bit of cake, yeah.”

Gabriella rolled her eyes, but didn’t reply. Xander got the impression it wasn’t from the lack of a cutting retort.

Turning his attention back to Melina, Xander could tell the moment she joined the dots between Gabriella’s question, Spike’s reply and the bite on his neck. Her hand flew to her mouth and, for the second time, she shoved her chair back from the table and stood,
walking quickly towards the sun room, her arms wrapped around her body. Xander straightened, pushing himself off the door jamb.

“No.” Gabriella’s command stopped him before he could take a single step. “Let her collect herself,” she said.

She turned back to Spike. “You don’t know the meaning of the word subtlety, do you? All you had to do was scope out the landscape. Perhaps ask a question or two, if the appropriate opportunity arose. But that was too straightforward. Too sensible and civilised.”

“Don’t blame Spike,” Xander interrupted. “It was my decision. I made the move. Both the moves,” he amended. “She spoke to me. Drusilla, I mean. She whispered in my head, after I killed Tiago. Before the bite. During...well, during. She knew. It felt like she was inside me, cheering me on. It felt terrifying and enticing. I felt like I was standing on the top of a cliff and she made jumping seem like the most logical choice in the world.”

Gabriella raised her eyebrows and Xander felt like he
wanted to curl into a ball and disappear from her dispassionate gaze. “All the more reason to stop this, before it goes any further,” she said. “You will go back to England and contact the priest. You will find out if the third book can help and you will do what needs to be done. Before you do something else that you regret.”

“You giving orders now?” Spike grinned at Gabriella.

“Spike, don’t,” Xander pleaded. “Yes, the plan is still to get the book, or to get information about it. We just got derailed.”

“Then you need to get back on track,” Melina said quietly, from the sun room doorway. “Find the book. Do what you need to do with it.” She turned to Gabriella. “I need to see him. Tiago. I need to see his body with my own eyes.”

Gabriella nodded, glancing at Spike and Xander as Melina skirted around the kitchen table. Xander shifted out of the doorway and took two steps sideways, until he was standing by Spike’s chair.

Melina paused by the kitchen door and looked back. “I
suspect we will be gone all day. I know that you don’t need blood, so that’s not a concern.” She gazed at Xander, before shifting her attention to Spike. “Don’t be here when we get back.”

Turning on her heel she left the kitchen. Gabriella followed, pausing only to nod to them both.

The sound of the front door shutting resounded in the early morning silence. Xander slumped down into his long vacated chair. Spike pulled out a cigarette and stared at it, before shoving it back in his pocket. Neither of them spoke for a long time.
Xander wasn’t sure what he expected Byland Abbey to be like, but the word ‘abbey’ inevitably conjured up images in his mind of something grand and gothic, like Westminster Abbey or, well, like Westminster Abbey, because he couldn’t actually think of any other abbey. He wasn’t quite sure what made something an ‘abbey’, instead of cathedral, or a minster, or any other word that someone might have come up with to describe a really, really grand church. Whatever the word, the last thing he was expecting, when they arrived in the cold of a late North Yorkshire afternoon, was a bleak, half flooded field and a pile of old, ruined, stone walls that wouldn’t have looked out of place in any good horror movie. Facing the quiet country road, were the remains of what had once been an imposing front edifice, that had obviously housed a spectacular circular window. By contrast, the inn across from the abbey was warm and snug and,
most importantly, in one piece. It was much more to Xander’s taste.

“Sad, isn’t it?” Spike said behind him. Xander glanced over his shoulder, nodding. He shifted slightly on the overstuffed window seat, returning his attention to the ruins silhouetted against the twilight sky. After a moment’s further contemplation, he turned away, stood and reclaimed his seat across from Spike, at a table near the bar.

He picked up his pint, sipping thoughtfully. “Definitely sad,” he replied. “Kind of magnificent at the same time. What happened to it?”

“Henry the Eighth happened,” Spike said. “Like a pile of other places, the abbey got caught up in the dissolution of the monasteries. It was prominent in the north and paid for it. So, bye bye Byland, you might say.”

“Sad,” Xander repeated. “Also kind of disturbing.”

“Yep, and now tourists come in their droves and take their photos, and videos, and wander ’round, trying to picture what it might have been like. The clever ones book themselves a night in here, so they can get a
decent meal, a bit to drink and a kip in a four poster bed. Better than Disneyland,” Spike said cynically. “Then they go back to Shitsville, Idaho, and wax lyrical about all the history they’ve seen.” He grinned. “It’s kind of civilised, really, though I’m guessing the monks wouldn’t have approved.”

“Talking of monks, or priests anyway, our one’s late.” Xander glanced at his watch. “He said he’d be here at half past.”

“So what? He’s a bit late,” Spike replied, taking a sip of his beer. “We’re six hours late, compared with when we originally told him we’d be here, when you first spoke to him on the phone. It would have been quicker walking from Lisbon than taking Air, bloody, Jalopy. Remind me never to use them again.”

Xander rolled his eye. “Well, I’m thinking after what you said to the flight attendant, we’re probably never going to be allowed to fly with them again, anyway.”

Spike chuckled. “Don’t know what you mean. I was perfectly civil. Not my fault she couldn’t take a joke. Her arse really was big in those trousers. Anyhow, stop fretting. The priest knew we were running late and he
said he’d be here. It’s not far to the school. All sorts of things could delay him. It’s not like we’ve got a tough billet while we’re waiting for him.” Spike gestured around the bar with his beer glass to illustrate his point and Xander had to admit that the 19th century inn was a step up from the normal dives they patronised on their travels for the Council.

“I still don’t see why we couldn’t meet him at the school?”

“A priest, dealing in arcane books, inviting two complete strangers to meet him at a school, with a pile of good Catholic kids just ripe for corruption,” Spike snorted. “Yeah, that would be a great idea. Got to give the man credit. He might be a man of the cloth, but he’s not stupid. This place is nice, neutral ground.”

“What if he doesn’t show?” Xander asked. “Or what if he won’t listen, or won’t sell us the book?”

Sighing, Spike put his beer down on the table. "If he doesn’t show, we’ll go up to the school, discretion be damned. If he won’t listen, we’ll persuade him. He’s a scholar, so he’ll be curious by nature. If he won’t sell us the book, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it."
Stop fretting about ‘what ifs’ and finish your pint.”

Xander contemplated his pint of Black Sheep. “What is it with beer and weird names in this country?”

“Part of our charm and individuality. Black Sheep is a brilliant bitter. You could have had Old Peculiar, but Black Sheep seemed appropriate.”

Staring into the depths of the pale, golden beer, Xander inhaled the scent of hops. He glanced up to find Spike watching him. “Is that what I am now to Melina – a black sheep?”

Spike shook his head. “Maybe a little bit grey. She wasn’t really shocked at you killing Tiago. She was shocked at the way he set up her little one. She feels guilty that you felt you had to kill him for her.” He took a long gulp of his beer and leaned back, watching Xander under lowered lids. “She was shocked about the bite and the sex.”

“She didn’t realise at first. I was kind of hoping she wouldn’t put it together.”

“Fat chance of that. It took her a moment, but she got
there. Saw the bite. Knew you’d killed. Give her some credit. She’s known about the supernatural all her life, so she put two and two together, and Bob’s your uncle, or in this case, Spike’s your sire. Like I say, she’s not stupid. One summer she was sleeping with you and the next…”

“Shut up Spike.” Xander took another sip of his beer, refusing to look up at Spike.

“Don’t think I will,” Spike said slowly. “You were big with the confessions about Tiago and the revelations about Dru, but not so much with coming clean about the rest. Good job Gabriella is good at jigsaws. Melina was just a moment behind.”

“Shut up Spike.” Xander repeated, still staring into his beer.

“Don’t want to sound like a broken record, but you can’t be a boy scout. Not now. We’re different. Different rules. Different needs. Different futures. “

Xander’s head jerked up. “You do sound like a broken record, so I’m not listening to this.”
“You’re going to have to eventually. It’ll happen again, I guarantee that.”

“What, you’re going to force me?” he asked, a hint of derision colouring his tone.

Spike shrugged. “Don’t have to force anything. It’ll just happen. It’s just the way it is. You made the first move. I was trying to give you time. That’s the soul working, but it’s just a control mechanism.”

“I’m not talking about this.”

“Sooner or later, you’re going to have to.”

Draining the last of his beer, Xander placed the empty glass on the table and stood. “I’ve spent years listening to Buffy talk about your soul. About how it made you better. I didn’t believe it then. Don’t believe it now. Not for you. Not for me. We’re both monsters. I might have made the first move, but don’t kid yourself that you were waiting for me to be ready. It wasn’t for my benefit. It was for Willow’s.” He glanced at his watch. “Our priestly scholar guy’s officially late. I’m going out to look.” He pulled out his wallet from his jacket pocket, extracted a five pound note and dropped it
down in front of Spike. “Why don’t you have another pint? Consider it payment for services rendered.”

Opening the main door of the inn, Xander stepped outside and closed the door firmly behind him. He stood on the front step, wondering momentarily if Spike was going to follow him, then squared his shoulders and walked across the gravel at the front of the building. He paused in the middle of the quiet country road, head cocked, listening to the sounds of the countryside in the twilight. A horse neighed somewhere to the right. It could have been one hundred yards away, or half a mile, the way the sound carried on the chill night air. Turning back to the old stone inn, through the window he could see Spike, still sitting in the bar, nursing a fresh pint. Spike didn’t look up, but Xander had no doubt that he knew that he was being watched. At that moment, Xander didn’t care. Turning his back, he glanced to his left and then his right, searching for a car, or bike, or any sign of their contact. The road stayed stubbornly empty of scholars bearing gifts.

A flurry of birds in the fields beyond the ruins of the old abbey caught his attention and, after only a few seconds hesitation, he strode across the road to the
small wooden gate, scanning the remains of the ancient walls. The birds fluttered and wheeled, and there was the faint glow of what might have been a flame, over in the far corner. He glanced about again, inwardly mocking the stab of guilt he felt when he climbed the gate, ignoring the honesty box bolted to the top spar, for tourists to contribute to the upkeep of the ancient monument.

He skirted the ruins of a long wall, heading for the back of the abbey. The grass squelched under foot, the flooding at the edge of the field evidence of a heavy rainfall over the previous few days. Picking his way carefully through the old stones, he was conscious that he was getting further and further from the comfort of the bright lights and warmth of the inn. A picture of Spike, sipping his Black Sheep, came to mind. He clenched his jaw and walked forward, trying to kick the image of the irritating vampire out of his head. He stumbled slightly over a broken stone he hadn’t seen, cursing Spike for distracting him. Straightening up, he again saw the flare of a flame. Moth-like, he followed its call. He could see the barbed wire at the end of the abbey site, marking the boundary to the farmer’s field next door that was bereft of cattle at this time of night. Clever cows, he thought. Warm and snug in their barn,
getting fed and fat for tomorrow’s milking. Not out in the cold and the dark, following hunches and getting away from annoying Sires.

The fire came into view, just beyond the next shattered wall and, as he drew near, he spied a dark shape lying in the shadows on the other side of the flames. He hurried forward, jumping lightly onto the top of the low wall.

A body lay face down on the wet grass, a heavy wool coat, half on and half off one shoulder. Slowly, Xander stepped off the stones and skirted the edge of the fire. He bent down, turning the body over. The man was chalk white, one hand gripped tightly on the strap of a battered, tan leather briefcase that had been torn open. His eyes stared sightlessly at the moon. Under the wet coat, he was dressed in black and if Xander hadn’t already guessed, the white dog collar at his neck proclaimed his profession as a man of God. Xander didn’t need to push his head to the side to know that there would be a wound at the neck, but a small voice in the back of his brain, that sounded uncannily like Giles, chided him on the dangers of assumptions and the importance of research. Unlike the endless nights in the high school library and the Magic Box, there
wasn’t much research required as he gently tilted the dead man’s head to the right, contemplating the red gash across the jugular. He wondered fleetingly if priests ever had barbeques and had to stifle a hysterical laugh.

Closing the priest’s eyes, he reminded himself why they were supposed to meet. He reached for the open briefcase, but even a cursory examination showed that it was empty. Sighing, he hunkered next to the body and watched the flames dancing in the small fire, just feet away. He focused on the ashes and cursed. Launching himself forward, he hauled the remains of the fuel for the fire out of the flames, yelping when his prize burned his fingers and palms. He threw it down onto the wet ground and pulled clumps of grass free, trying to dampen the remaining flames. Finally, the fire extinguished, the heavy leather cover of an ancient book lay on the sodden earth, but when Xander carefully opened the binding, there was nothing left but ash and dust and scraps of parchment left illegible by fire and the damp night air.

He knelt on the wet grass, one hand on the burned out book, his eyes fixed on the body of the priest. He wanted to say something. To apologise for needing the
man’s help. For asking him to meet them. For leading him to his death. He wanted to ask for forgiveness, in what had once been a place of worship, a light of the church in this hard land. But he was a monster. He didn’t deserve forgiveness. Now all he could do was atone.

The sound of footsteps on stone, in the silence of the night, broke him out of his reverie. He sprang to his feet and turned, expecting to see Spike. It wasn’t Spike. Drusilla stood on top of the low, broken wall, her back to the body of the ruins. Her eyes gleamed in the moonlight and she spread her arms wide, as if accepting homage from her audience of two – one undead and one dead. Xander started to move, to speak, to throw himself at her, but as the scattered thoughts of action tumbled in his head, he found that his feet were planted firmly on the wet grass, as if he had been planted and had grown tall and old in the lee of the ancient stones.

She stepped forward, jumped down from the wall and daintily picked her way through the tussocks of wet grass, every inch the princess, or the queen. Pausing in front of him, she lifted one white hand, tipped with silver, and ran it down the side of his face, caressing
the edge of his eye patch, then down over his lips. She stepped back, a smile on her face, like the cat with a pitcher of cream. Xander couldn’t have spoken if his life depended on it.

“Oh my chick, so nearly grown,” she whispered, looking around as if worried that someone might overhear. “Almost out of the egg. Then you will fly.” She threw her hands in the air and spun in a circle. “Then you will soar.

“Did you like my present? I gave you presents before. All wrapped up in scarlet ribbons, but you didn’t thank me. No manners now. I remember 'please' and 'thank you'. Writing notes with pen, and ink, and parchment. Proper thank you for a proper present.” She wagged her finger under his nose like a headmistress to a naughty school boy. For a moment Xander thought she was going to smack him on the nose like a bad dog. “But boys today, no manners... no thanks... no decorum.”

She performed a few delicate dance steps to the side, then turned and jumped lightly up onto the remains of the wall, ignoring the body of the fallen scholar as she skipped over him. She turned and bowed to her
audience. “Did you hear the priests wail, little one? Henry made them cry and the stones crumbled – ashes to ashes, dust to dust is all that’s left. Byland Abbey weeps. Byland, the little priests cried, and cursed, and prostrated themselves to their god. Do you want to come with me? Worship me. Bow down and cleave to me. Byland, my love. Say Byland. Say bye Byland. Kneel to the virgin. Prostrate yourself and pray to the light on the water.”

She jumped off the wall and moved behind him, whispering in his ear. Xander shivered but he couldn’t move, as her voice oozed down the length of his spine. “Tell William. Tell my Spike. Tell him he won’t find any light at the bottom of the mine, but oh what mighty lanterns they’ve built. Grace to the lady. Bow to the mother. Worship to the virgin. Bye Byland. Sing your siren song to the sea.”

He felt a soft kiss land on the back of his neck and, against his will, his eye drooped shut, just for a moment, but it was enough. A faint cry of “Ask my Spike. Then come to me, my loves,” floated back on the night air.

Suddenly, Xander felt like he was waking for a dream.
He whirled around, but there was nothing but the ruins of the old stones, the ashes of a fire, the remains of an ancient and now useless book, and the body of the hapless, scholarly priest who had committed no crime, other than to be a possessor of arcane knowledge.

He stood over the body and struggled with his conscience. He knew that he should run to the inn and raise the alarm, to give the man the attention and care that he deserved. But the pragmatist that had developed in all the years he’d been a Scooby knew that he couldn’t afford to draw the attention and possibly allow someone else to get hurt. He knelt and whispered an apology to the dead man, before slipping off his coat and wrapping the remains of the book in its thick woollen folds. Standing, he kicked at the embers of the fire and, with a shiver, he headed back towards the inn.

Much as he didn’t want to, he needed to talk to Spike and they needed to leave while the darkness held. Before someone else was killed because of him.
Spike was draining his pint when Xander walked back into the bar and leaned against the wall by the door as casually as he could, given he had just left a murder scene. Putting his glass down on the table, Spike shook his head at the barman’s question about another drink and ambled across the floor. Xander waited. He had to admit that Spike could do casual, nonchalant even, a lot better than he could.

“So,” Spike said. “Worked off your snit, did you?”

“You could say that,” Xander replied shortly. His hands clamped down hard on the book in his arms, wrapped in his coat like some ridiculous present. “Enough to know that we have to leave.”

“Do we now?” Spike crossed his own arms. His shoulders were back and his lips twitched, half way between a grin and a sneer. “And why’s that?”

“Please Spike, not now. We need to go.” Xander turned and pulled open the outside door, stepping out into the dark, heading for the car without looking to see if Spike was following. The creak of the door opening and shutting behind him, told him that Spike was.
He paused by the door of the rental vehicle, cursing quietly under his breath when he realised that Spike had the keys. Glancing back, he saw Spike standing several feet away, watching him. “We need to leave,” Xander repeated. “Give me the keys.”

Spike shook his head. “Don’t think so. If anyone is driving here, it’s going to be me. You look like you’ve seen a ghost and you smell like a boy scout on bonfire night. What’s going on?”

Xander slumped back against the side of the car. “I found our priest,” he said tiredly. “In the abbey. Dead.” He unwrapped his coat, showing Spike the charred remains of the leather binding. “Seems an old, magical book makes good kindling. There’s nothing left but the cover.” He ran his hand over the scorched leather, aware that Spike was still watching him, before looking up. “She was there. Dru. She killed the priest. Left him dead on the wet ground.” He could almost hear her laughing in the back of his mind and he shuddered. “She burned the book, Spike. It’s not any use to us now, if it ever was.”

“Guess we’ll never know,” Spike said slowly. “Is that it? Did she say anything?”
“She rambled and whispered like she always does. The usual cryptic bullshit.”

“So, she knew we were coming.” Spike sounded surprisingly like Gabriella, making questions into statements, because they’d both seen and done too much to be surprised.

“I might as well be electronically tagged,” Xander said bitterly. “She knows where I am. Wherever, whenever. She always knows.” Dropping his coat on the ground, he held the remains of the book in both hands, gripping hard. With a strangled cry he threw it at Spike. He wasn’t surprised when Spike caught it.

Spike stared down, his long fingers white against the charred remains of the leather cover. The fingers drummed once, then stopped. Spike looked back up at Xander. “Pick up your coat,” he said abruptly, walking quickly around to the right hand side of the car. “We should get out of here. Head back towards York. You can give me the full story on the way.” He fished the keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door, wedging the remains of the book between the seat and the handbrake before sliding in behind the wheel.
shoved the key in the ignition.

Xander stood for a second, looking out into the dark, before stooping to pick up his coat. He pulled open the passenger door and bent down.

Spike looked across at him. “Get in,” he said and started the engine. Xander did as he was told and stared straight ahead, the image of the dead priest, a burning book, and Drusilla spinning in the moonlight, running through his head like a macabre ticker-tape as they drove headlong into the night.

“How are we?” he asked finally, when the motion of the car slowing down and stopping brought him back to himself. He looked out of the window at the small rest area, on the edge of a hedged in field.

“About half way to York,” Spike replied. “You drifted for a while. So, you going to tell me what happened?”

Leaning his head back against the headrest, Xander sighed. “I guess so. It’s just…just too much. You know?” he said, rolling his head to look sideways at Spike.

“Yeah, I know. I was with her for a hundred years. I
know how she can get under your skin, until it’s hard to know which way is up.”

“That’s one way of putting it, I suppose.” Xander looked down, noticing the charred remains of the book cover. He pulled it free from its resting place and laid it carefully across his knee, his fingers tracing the embossed design that was barely discernible on the charred leather. “This was our lead,” he said wearily. “Now it’s gone and there’s another body to add to the count.” He studied his hands for a second, then turned to look at Spike. “You know I have to go after her, don’t you? I can’t stand for this to go on anymore. There are so many people dead and, whatever you say, it’s still my fault in the end. I’ll understand if you won’t help, but please don’t try to stop me.”

“If you think I’m going to stand by while you play the tragic hero, you’re even more deluded than I thought.” Spike replied. “You know the Witch will stake me, the first chance she gets, if I let you go off on your own.”

Xander’s mouth twisted in a faint smile. “I’ll handle Willow. But I’m serious, Spike. I can’t go on like this. I have to try to stop it.” He glanced back down at the book and closed his eye for a second before looking
back up. “I know that you loved her. I can feel that running through me, in a way I never understood before. She wants us both, but perhaps she’ll be happy if it’s just me. If I can get close, I can end it.”

Shaking his head, Spike grimaced. “It’s whose end you’re after that worries me. And that takes us right back to the Witch coming after me with a nice bit of polished oak you probably carved for her. I know what you’re saying. Appreciate the concern, even. I understand that you need to go after her. But you’re not ready yet. Not on your own. I know my Dru, she’ll not let you close on your own. She wants a package deal, so that’s what we’ll give her.” Spike’s voice was firm and determined, but his knuckles were white on the edge of the steering wheel as he spoke. Xander decided not to push him any further.

“Okay,” he sighed. “I guess we should call Willow, let her know where we are. Then I’ll just have to explain what happened, the once. Maybe you can work out between the two of you what we do next.” Without waiting for a reply, Xander dug his cell phone out of his pocket and hit speed dial one. It only rang twice.

“Xander?” Willow’s voice was breathless and tinny at
the end of the phone. “Where are you? Did you meet with the priest? Did you get the book? Did it help?”

“Whoa, slow down Wills. You want to do your speaker phone mojo? Spike’s here with me.” He pushed another button and placed the cell phone on the dashboard near the stereo speakers. After a slight silence he heard Willow muttering a few words, then the sound of her breathing in and out spilled out of the speakers, loud and clear. He felt like he could reach out and touch her, or spend hours listening to the sound of her just being alive.


“Not so much, Wills. The priest was dead. I found him in the abbey grounds. The book was burned.” He heard her curse under her breath. “Drusilla was there, Will. She was there at the abbey. She knew where to look and she waited. She killed him and she burned the book.” He knew his voice was getting louder, echoing inside the small car.

“Xander?” Willow said, but he ploughed on, not giving her a chance to continue.
“We’ll never know if it was any use now. It could all be another mind fuck, but we’ll never know because she burned...the...book.”

“Is there anything left?” Willow said softly, her voice barely a whisper in the dark.

Xander stared blindly out into the night and Spike intervened. “Just the binding. The leather is tough as old boots, so it didn’t burn easily. But the contents are ashes.”

“Shit.”

“That’s about the size of it, Witch. Unless you’ve got any other magical books up your sleeve that’ll give us an idea how to block Dru, or shut her down?”

A sigh, soft as a whisper, came over the airwaves. “No...no I don’t. I’m sorry. I was so sure the family magic would help. Maybe if you can give me some more time, I might...”

“We’re out of time, Will,” Xander interrupted. “The only family magic we have is our connection and if I
“Xander,” Willow’s voice was stronger now, but there was still a hesitancy that he didn’t like. He wished that he could see her in person. He felt guilty that he’d shouted, but what was one more guilt to add to the whole. “Did she do anything? Say anything that might help?”

“She laughed and she rambled. You know what she’s like,” he said bitterly. “Kept repeating the name of the abbey, like some kind of mantra. ‘Byland. Say Byland. Then something about kneeling to the virgin and bowing to the mother.’” He paused, rubbing restlessly at the skin below his eye patch. “I’d say it was all drivel, but after all her other ramblings, I think it probably did mean something. I just don’t know what.”

“Okay, did she say anything else?”

Spike shifted restlessly in his seat and Xander turned his head. “She said I had to ask Spike. Actually, to tell William. To tell Spike.”

“Tell me what?”
Xander tipped his head back, making himself relive the scene. “That there’s no light at the bottom of a mine...” he said. “That one seems pretty self evident, to be honest. Then something about they’d built lanterns. Whoever they are? Mighty lanterns, she said. And something about praying to the light on the sea.”

“Okay,” Willow said. “That sounds a bit bonkers even for Dru, but we know she always has her reasons, even if they’re screwed up to us. Spike, does that mean anything to you? Anything at all?”

Spike sat silently in the driver’s seat, his eyes closed. Xander could almost see him sifting through the words of his mad Sire. Xander watched one hand snake into the pocket of his duster and pull out the Zippo and cigarette packet. Without opening his eyes, Spike extracted one, lit it and took a long pull.

Willow’s voice broke the silence. “I’m guessing William was never down a mine, so it’s probably a metaphor for something.”

Spike’s eyes flew open. “The closest William ever came to a mine was the coal scuttle the servants would bring
in for the fire.” He gazed at the lit end of his fag. “But I have,” he said slowly. “I wasn’t long turned,” he said, turning to look at Xander. “1880ish, we were here in Yorkshire. Angelus was pissed off because I’d stirred up the locals. The four of us finished up hiding down a sodding mine shaft. Her royal highness, Queen Darla, was not amused, which means she bitched at Angelus. He got snotty with me and Dru.” He smiled, like he was remembering something close to his heart. “First time I ever heard about a Slayer was down the bottom of that mine.”

The sound of a throat being cleared from the other end of the phone brought Spike back to himself. “Sorry,” he said. “Not exactly the memory you’re wanting. But yeah, that’s the only time I’ve been down a mine. Dru always wanted to go back. Said that the layers of rocks whispered to her. That she could feel the weight of the centuries in the ground above our heads and hear the coal being born. After that little adventure we finished up kicking around Europe and Russia for a while. Then me and Dru got bored and left them to it. Came back into England by boat in the mid 1890’s. Dru ate most of the crew and we finished up crashing into the docks at Whitby. Caused quite a stir.” Xander heard Willow stifle a giggle and he watched Spike grin in response. “We
spent some time travelling. Dru loved the steam train. Took it right up the coast - Saltburn, Redcar, Tynemouth and Whitley Bay, all genteel facades that wouldn’t know a monster until it walked up and swallowed them whole. There was so much building going on. So much engineering.” He glanced over at Xander. “Victorian engineering,” he said with a smirk.

Willow’s voice came over the air, the giggle from the moment before replaced with a reproving tone Xander recognised from years of unfinished homework. “Fascinating as this is, Spike, we don’t really have time for the history lesson.”

“Give me a mo’, I’m trying to work out why she’d mention the mine and how it fits with the other stuff. “ He closed his eyes again. “We were in the mine. Then we went abroad. Then we came back and Dru was so giddy about all the industry. We went up the north east coast and – “ His head jerked back, thumping hard on the driver seat headrest. He pulled sharply on his cigarette. “Fuck. She can be so damn literal sometimes, it makes my head hurt. Even when she’s rambling, there’s always something. Sometimes just the whisper of a thread, but sometimes a rope so strong, you could hang yourself from it.”
“Jesus, Spike, stop rambling and tell us.”

“The light on the sea. All the stuff about kneeling to the virgin and worshiping the mother. St Mary’s. She’s talking about bloody St Mary’s. It’s a lighthouse, on an island, off Whitley Bay. 1896/97 or there about - they were just starting to build it, when we were there. Dru was fascinated by the idea that they were building this tower into the sky. That it would be able to sing to the ships and keep them safe. She’s heading for St Mary’s. Fuck,” he repeated. “She must have laughed herself silly when we headed for the priest to get the book and arranged to meet him by the abbey, rather than the school. I know how she thinks. ‘Byland’ - she’s playing with words – ‘bye land’. The lighthouse is on an island. You have to get to it by a causeway at low tide. Bloody, bye land. That’s where she wants us."

“Then that’s where we’re going,” Xander said. “How far is it?”

“Couple of hours driving at most. We can be there long before dawn.”

“Spike,” Willow’s voice was urgent, even at a distance.
“I should come up. I can be there in a few hours. I need some time to get my strength back, because I’m pretty tapped out at the moment. We had some excitement of our own while you were in Lisbon. Will you wait for me?”

“Stay where you are Wills. You’re needed in London. We’ll be fine.”

“But Xander…”

“Please, Willow. We’ll be fine. This has to be done, and it has to be done by me.” He glanced over at Spike. “By us,” he amended.

“Xander,” she tried again.

“Please, Wills.”

“Okay,” she sighed. “But Spike, if anything happens to him, there won’t be a mine deep enough to hide in, understand.”

“Loud and clear, Witch, loud and clear.”

“And Xander, I should tell you before you go. Gabriella
called. She wanted me to give you a message.”

“What did she say?.” Xander wasn’t sure he wanted to hear, but he knew Willow wouldn't let him go until he asked.

“She said to give Melina time.”

“Okay,” he replied. He didn't know what else to say.

“She also said...she said she would see you the next time you were in Venice.”

“I’m guessing that message was just for the boy, yeah?” Spike said cynically.

Willow sighed. “I don’t know, Spike. I hope it’s for both of you, but she wasn’t specific, so I guess you can interpret it any way you like. Gabriella doesn’t usually do ambiguity, so I suspect leaving it open to interpretation was deliberate.”

“Well isn’t that just peachy of her,” Spike replied with a swift glance over to Xander. “We’ve got to get going, so let’s leave the speculation for now, yeah?”
Xander leaned forward, his hand resting next to the phone as if he could almost reach out and touch his oldest friend through the Aether. “Love you Wills,” he said. “Give my thanks to Gabriella, if you are speaking to her again. We’ve got to go. The clock’s ticking on the darkness and we’ve got some ground to cover.”

“Be careful, please,” she pleaded.

“Always. Love you,” Xander said again and pressed the disconnect button before she could say anything else. He shoved the phone back in his jacket pocket. “Okay,” he said. “Let’s go. We’ve got a lighthouse to find. Then we’re going to finish this, once and for all.”

Spike started the engine and maneuvered the car back into the road.

Xander watched as the digital clock on the dashboard ticked down and he thought about four white plaques in a Victorian tomb, in London. He wondered if the next two plaques would belong to them.
The headlights of the rental car cut through the darkness as Spike swept into the empty parking lot, passing the pay and display machine. Xander noted that they didn’t stop to get a ticket. The car rolled to a halt at the furthest point from the gate to the main road.

Spike switched off the engine and opened his door. “Right, here we are then,” he said.

“Here we are,” Xander echoed. He opened his own door and eased out, stretching out the kinks from being too tall for the too small car. Taking an unneeded breath, he let the crisp, sea air fill his lungs. He glanced across at Spike. “Do we have a plan?”

“First thing is to hike along the top of the cliff. The lighthouse is out there.” Spike gestured into the darkness to his left.

“Couldn’t we have got closer?”
“Yep, but there’s not exactly a lot of traffic around here at this time of night, for us to blend in. No point in tipping our hand.”

“You really don’t think she knows we’re here?” Xander asked dubiously.

Spike shrugged. “There is that,” he acknowledged. “But we might as well give ourselves any edge we can get. Who knows, maybe we got here first.”

Before Xander could muster a reply, Spike strode off into the darkness. With a sigh, Xander rolled his shoulders, shut the car door and followed.

The path meandered along the edge of a sea-side golf course –‘links’, Spike called it. Xander cursed for the third time in as many minutes as his foot hit an errant golf ball, that had no business being so close to the cliff without actually having the decency to topple over the edge. He could hear the swish of the water, but when he looked out into the darkness, the sea was far out. The moon reflected on the nighttime, alien landscape of the wet sand, the tangled pieces of seaweed and driftwood, and the detritus of day trippers, long since gone home and tucked up warm in their beds.
After ten minutes of steady walking, they hit a concrete path at the end of the cliff and descended cautiously, looking for any sign of life. But there was just the ever present sound and smell of the distant sea and a faint light, several hundred feet ahead, that seemed to float somewhere above the sand.

Xander looked at Spike questioningly. “That light looks a bit low to be any good to ships,” he said.

“The lighthouse isn’t operational any more, otherwise there would be a bloody great lamp blinking on and off. There’s a pile of places like this all over the country, that are museum pieces now. But there are a couple of houses on the island. The light is probably from them.” He stared out into the darkness before looking back at Xander. “Right then,” he said determinedly. “Let’s get this show on the road. The causeway’s pretty clear for now. We’re lucky the tide’s out. We might as well get this over and done with.”

“Spike, it doesn’t really matter about the tide. It’s not like we have to breathe.” Xander chuckled. He hated how nervous it sounded.
“Yeah, but I don’t like getting my boots wet, if I can help it.” Spike lit up a cigarette with a flourish and grinned cockily. Xander was intimately familiar with bravado.

Spike started forward, but Xander grabbed him by the shoulder, forcing him to stop before he had taken more than a step. “Spike, are you okay? I can do this. You don’t have to come.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Going in there like High Noon.” He pulled at the lapels of his duster, squaring it on his shoulders. “Well, I’ve got news for you, mate. I’m no Grace Kelly and you’re no Gary Cooper. Never was a Zinnemann fan. Not enough bite, if you know what I mean. I’m more of a Peckinpah man.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

Xander gazed at Spike for a moment longer, trying to find something else to say. But there were no words, so he nodded and walked past Spike and out onto the causeway. He could hear the clump, clump, clump of Spike’s boots at his back as they made their way across the narrow strip of concrete that was the pathway to the island. They moved steadily towards the lighthouse
and he found a bizarre comfort in the dull thump of leather on stone.

The narrow causeway curved to the left near the end, but Xander looked up to his right, his eyes fixed on the luminous white tower of the lighthouse gleaming in the moonlight. Suddenly, he stopped dead and looked back at Spike. “Look at that,” he said quietly, pointing upwards.

Spike looked up, studying the night sky and the lighthouse above them. He glanced back at Xander and then back up. “Fuck.” At the top of the tower, a faint light flickered in the darkness, seemingly ebbing and flowing like the tide. “Looks like there’s someone up there,” he said eventually. “If the place was still in operation, I’d say maybe it was the lighthouse keeper. I don’t suppose it’s a bunch of tourists, who’ve decided
Xander smiled, but he knew it was strained, even without the look on Spike’s face. “I’m guessing not. So we’ve got a reception committee and not much room for maneouvre.”

“We could always wait at the bottom for her, or them, to come down,” Spike replied, but there was no conviction in his voice.

Shaking his head, Xander turned back to the light. “No. I’m tired of waiting. She wants us to go up, so I’m going up. One way or the other, this will be over before I come down.”

They found the first body on the doorstep to the small museum shop, at the base of the lighthouse. The sign on the inside of the glass said it was open on Saturdays and Sundays. Xander noted in a corner of his mind that it was Tuesday. The woman was slumped in a graceless heap, face pressed against the base of the door, blood dripping slowly onto the ground from the gaping wound on the side of her neck. Xander didn’t need to close his eyes to picture the victim clawing hopelessly at the door, desperate for safety and sanctuary, before
her murderer delivered the killing wound.

“Poor cow,” Spike murmured. “Never stood a chance.” He turned the handle on the shop door and pushed it open. The body fell forward with a dull thud. Spike stepped over it and walked into the gloom of the shop.

Xander stared down at the woman, then looked back up to find Spike watching him from just beyond the threshold. “What should we do with her?” he asked.

“Can’t do much. Not like we can bury her. Best haul her properly inside. No point in leaving her out. Don’t want anyone falling over her, then suing the place because there’s no sign saying ‘Please Mind the Corpses’.”

“You’re sick, you know that?” Shaking his head, Xander bent down and grasped the woman under her arms, pulling her fully inside the building. He laid the body on the floor along the far wall, underneath a shelf of fluffy, toy seabirds and a rack of postcards. Somehow, he didn’t think it was a montage that would make it into the next edition of the local tourist magazine.

Standing up, he glanced across at Spike. “So I guess that was probably the appetiser?”
Spike shrugged. “Knowing Dru, it might be the party favour.”

Xander shuddered, but Spike was already turning away. “Come on, we’re just giving her more time.”

They moved quietly through the shop, stepping over knocked down stands of tourist leaflets, following a gaudy line of blood painted on the floor, like aircraft emergency lighting, guiding them forward. The blood snaked out through a door at the far end of the shop and on through a children’s play area, where white paper and brass rubbings of shells and sea creatures were daubed with red.

“All this blood didn’t come out of that body back there,” Xander said softly.

“No it didn’t.”

Easing forward, Xander got a sudden sense of space and height. There was a sound of drip, drip, drip in the gloom. He felt his demon come forward as the smell of blood and other, less pleasant odours permeated his senses. He gripped Spike’s arm. As one they walked in
the direction of the sound and the smell.

The old light mechanism was displayed for the tourists to see, in the middle of the circular floor, its multiple lamps mounted high on a central shaft. Under normal circumstances, the craftsman in Xander would have been fascinated by the intricacies and simplicity of the machine that had once topped the lighthouse. Now, instead of saving lives, the machine had become a gallows. A body dangled from one of the metal struts holding a lamp, hanging from a sturdy leather belt. It didn’t take vampire senses to realise that the unfortunate man hadn’t died from strangulation; his throat had been cut and his stomach slit from bottom to top, gutting him like a sacrificial animal.

“I think we found your appetiser, pet.”

Without looking at Spike, Xander walked forward, his eyes fixed on the body, hanging like a grotesque marionette. “Help me get him down,” he said.

“That’s not going to help him. He’s not been dead long, but there’s nothing you can do.”

“I can cut him down. I’m not leaving him hanging here,
like a side of beef in a butcher’s shop.” Xander grabbed the body around the waist with one arm, taking the weight, while trying to undo the belt with the other hand. He tried to ignore the ooze of blood from the stomach wound as he struggled with the buckle, but then another hand batted his away, and he concentrated on holding the body while Spike worked on the belt. After a seemingly endless minute, Spike grunted and the body dropped, pulling Xander to the floor before he could brace himself. “Thanks for the warning,” he muttered, pulling himself up into a kneel. He stared down at the man who’s only mistake, like the woman on the door step and the scholar in the abbey grounds, was to gain the attention of a crazy woman, intent on creating her own hellish sideshow.

Standing up, Xander stared at Spike in confusion as he knelt down, pulling the dead man’s jacket straight and digging his hands into the pockets.

“What the hell are you doing? You can’t loot the dead,” Xander whispered.

“Not looting. Just seeing if he’s got anything useful.” To Xander’s surprise Spike discarded a wallet, throwing it on the ground, but pocketed some string, a set of keys
and an open packet of Marlboros.

Bending down, Xander picked up the wallet, flicking through the contents, pausing over the pieces of plastic and cardboard that proved that the man had existed. That he had lived. There was a library card, an expired bus pass and a couple of photographs of a small boy with a dog. Xander’s hand started to shake, but he carefully returned the photos to the wallet and continued his examination. A small, creased ID card was shoved into the back compartment. “He was the caretaker,” he murmured.

Spike glanced up. “Poor bastard. Probably thought he was on a cushy number. Pound to a penny that’s his wife out there,” he said, before going back to turning out the dead man’s other pocket.

Xander knew it was useless to protest, so he laid the wallet back down beside the body and stood up. Leaving Spike to his own devices he took a look around, noticing the peeling paint on the walls and the faint glow from the moon that glimmered through a small window, part way up the side of the tower. It drew his eye upwards. If he’d been breathing, he would have stopped.
“Spike,” he said. “Look up.”

Still kneeling on the ground next to the corpse, Spike looked up. “Bugger,” he said.

He rose to his feet in one smooth motion and Xander glared at him. “When you said ‘lighthouse’, I was expecting those windy steps going round and round a central core. You know, the type you always get in horror movies, when the hero can’t tell if the baddie is around the next curve? I didn’t expect that.”

The inside of the lighthouse was hollow, stretching up as far as they could see, making him dizzy. An old, iron staircase clung to the wall like a limpet, spiraling upwards, reaching for the heavens. Xander wanted to be sick and
Drusilla spun in his head, her arms outstretched, weaving patterns in the air that seemed to ooze in and out of the metal stairway, making it shift and roil like snakes on a boiling sea.

“Xander?” The voice was far away and Xander’s head swam, until the voice came again, this time with a hard shake on his shoulder. “Xander, pay attention.”

Rubbing his hand over his face, Xander focused on Spike. “Shit. Sorry. I just...just got lost for a minute...” He faltered and rubbed his face again. “I can’t take much more of this. It needs to stop.”

Spike nodded. “So we make it stop.” He lifted his hand, like he was going to grab Xander’s shoulder again, but then the gesture grew soft and he pushed Xander’s hair out of his eyes. He turned away quickly. “Let’s get going. I’ll go first. You watch my back.”

Mounting the first step, Spike looked upwards and sighed before taking the next step, and the next, and the next. Xander followed behind. There was no sound in the hollow stone shell, apart from the clang of boots on metal and Spike’s muttered, “I hate fucking heights,” as they climbed.
Part way up Xander told himself to keep looking forward, but as soon as the thought entered his head his body reacted and his eyes were inexorably drawn downwards. The floor below seemed a mile away and the body of the dead man lay stiff and cold, a discarded doll, abandoned for the lure of a better game. Stumbling, Xander grabbed at the rail and steadied himself. Spike glanced back. “You all right?” Xander nodded and swallowed the bile in his throat as they climbed again.

They reached half way and Xander knew that the only way was upwards. If he stopped now, he’d be frozen, unable to go forward or go back. The hysteria at the thought of being stuck forever on the stair, a bizarre addition to the museum, nearly made him choke. He focused on Spike’s back and the thump of footfalls on metal. His right hand slid along the railing, knuckle white, while his left, palm flattened, skimmed against the uneven surface of the peeling paint on the curving stone wall. And they climbed.

Spike stopped and Xander gripped the railing, steadying himself with his other hand which involuntarily came to rest at the base of Spike’s spine. The narrow door to
the top of the lighthouse lay ahead. Grey and non-descript, it stood slightly ajar and there was the flicker of a flame, that could have been a candle, or possibly a kerosene lamp, making the opening glow faintly in the darkness. He heard Spike take a deep breath and push the door open, stepping off the top step and over the threshold with a swagger that Xander knew he didn’t feel. Xander followed.

The first thing he saw was the trio of thick, creamy candles at the north, west, and east points of the circular room. They flickered in the draft from the open door, casting crazy shapes on the thick walls and reflecting back off the windows. A fourth candle lay burned out at the south end of the room, just inside the door.

The second thing he saw was a shadow detach itself from the darkness between the north and west candles. The room wasn’t large and Xander wondered how he could have missed her, as Drusilla stepped into the light and extended her arms in a parody of welcome. Dressed in black silk, her hair shone in the candle light, soft ringlets brushing over her shoulders and caressing the top of her breasts. Her skin was white and her dress and hair were dark as the night
outside, but her lips were daubed with scarlet and, when she moved and swayed in the candlelight, her bare feet left patterns of rusty red on the dull grey of the concrete floor.


She glided forward and, just like in the abbey, Xander found himself frozen when she shifted behind him. “Shall I train you, puppy? Put you in a collar and make you beg?” He could feel her cold breath on the back of his neck and his eyes met Spike’s, but neither of them moved. Neither of them spoke. He felt the scrape of her fangs against his neck, over the point where Spike had bitten him in Tiago’s workshop in Lisbon. He shuddered as the scrape of teeth was replaced by the softest of butterfly kisses in the same spot. “Someone was naughty,” she murmured, her mouth still against his skin. “Tasting forbidden fruit. Eating the sweetmeats before you’ve cleared up your plate.” She
kissed his neck again and danced away, spinning from one candle to another, until she came to rest in front of Spike.

“Can you count the candles? Can you add them up? There’s one and two and three. One for me. One for you. One for our baby boy. There was a fourth. It was so bright,” she whispered. “Bright as an angel, but it’s all burned out now. All gone,” she said sadly.

“Dru,” Spike started tentatively.

She smiled. “Did you miss me, my pet?” Her eyes were wide and innocent, her hands clasped behind her back like a school girl on her best behavior.

Spike nodded his head slowly before flicking a glance at Xander, then back to Drusilla’s face. “Yeah, I missed you, Dru. Missed you a lot.”

She unclasped her hands and clapped them in front of her with childish glee.

“But that was a while ago. A lot’s changed since then.” He looked away, fixing his gaze on Xander and dug in the pocket of his duster, pulling out the caretaker’s
packet of Marlboros and his Zippo. He lit up before looking back at her. “You left, Dru. You don’t get to call me back now. You missed your chance.”

Grinning slyly, Dru plucked the cigarette out of Spike’s mouth and took a long puff. “See, my pet? There is nothing you can have, that I can’t take. There’s nothing you can take, that I can’t have. Not slayers, or watchers, or bright, shiny keys to the world.” She glanced back at Xander. “Not tarnished errand boys.” She paused and looked around, before putting her finger to her lips as if they would dare to interrupt her. She leaned forward. “Not witches,” she whispered.

Xander felt his scream come from a thousand miles away. When it hit, it echoed in the small chamber, bouncing off the walls like cannon fire. He moved quicker than thought, as if the sound had unfrozen time, and launched himself at Drusilla, crashing into her and smashing her head hard against the crisscrossed window at her back. His hands clutched for her throat, but she twisted, shoving him back against the window in his turn, her hand in his hair and another clutching at his balls through the crotch of his jeans.

“Not nice,” she growled. “Not nice at all. You’ll need to
be punished, pet. Put in your kennel without any supper. Bad dog.”

Xander brought his hands up, shoving hard at her chest, trying to push her away, but the hand at his balls gripped harder and he stilled, just for a second, gasping for un-needed air.

“See,” she growled, digging her fingers deeper into his hair. “Bad dogs can be trained. Going to roll over and show me your belly, my pet?”

Xander shook his head as much as he could in her grip. “Going to send you to hell,” he growled back. He shoved again, ignoring the pain between his legs, trying to distract her from noticing Spike, who was striding across the small room, stake in hand. He tried to pull free of the hand in his hair, but she hauled his head back and released her hold on his crotch to grab hold of his chin, keeping him still until all he could see was her face. All he could see were her eyes. He was caught and she swallowed him whole. Time seemed to stretch and contract like elastic and she kissed him gently and murmured in his ear. Helpless to resist, he spun them around, his back instead of hers facing outwards as Spike brought the stake down.
He screamed as the wood bit deep into his flesh and collapsed to the floor. His head swam with the pain, but after the first wave he opened his eyes. He saw Spike struggling with Drusilla. She clawed at his face, her teeth bared and her eyes blazing with hate.

Struggling to his feet, Xander twisted his hand back, groping for the stake where it was lodged below his shoulder blade, close to the heart, but not close enough to kill. A part of his brain promised that he would mock Spike’s aim, if they got out in one piece. His fingers closed around the wood and he hauled, pulling it free, his hand shaking and the stake slick with his blood. He tried to steady himself, to find a place in his mind where Drusilla didn’t whisper, but her voice stretched and oozed in his head and he swayed.

Spike and Dru cannoned off the wall, locked in their own personal war. Xander grabbed at the edge of a window, trying to keep himself upright, but the glass was slick and cold and his hands skidded across it as his legs gave way. The gore stained stake slipped from his trembling fingers. It slid across the floor towards the door. Throwing himself on his side, he tried to catch it, but it teetered on the edge for a fragment of a second.
Then it was gone.

Xander didn’t wait to hear it hit the ground below. Turning, he pushed himself up, looking around frantically for another weapon, before grabbing a candle. With two short strides he crossed the room.

Spike was against the wall, his neck bent back and blood running down his face as Dru bent her head, her fangs gleaming in the moonlight. “First the big, bad grizzly bear, then the cub,” she murmured. “Going to put a ring through your nose and make you dance to my tune.” Her teeth bore down and her body swayed, thrumming with power and passion. Xander thrust the candle up into her hair.

Drusilla wailed, batting at her ringlets as the flames took hold. Spike shoved her backwards and her head crashed against one of the window. The sound of breaking glass and the smell of burning hair filled the small room. Spike grabbed Xander and pushed him towards the door. “Move your arse,” he yelled.

Xander stared at him uncomprehendingly. “But this is our chance.”
“No, it’s not.” Spike shoved again, propelling him towards the doorway. “Get out,” he shouted. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Xander wanted to protest, but the look on Spike’s face brooked no argument. He turned, grabbing the top of the handrail as he descended the first few steps, before pausing and looking back up. He could feel his shirt sticking to his back where the blood from the stake wound had dried tacky on his skin. There was a scream and a crash and Spike hurtled out of the door above him, hauling it shut and hanging on for grim death as the heavy wood shook and shivered from blows on the other side. Spike looked down. “Going to have to give me a hand, pet. Don’t know if I can hold this on my own.”

Nodding, Xander started back up the few steps that separated them. His hand, still slick with his own blood, slipped on the rail. He stumbled, crashing to his knees and Spike grabbed the back of his jacket with one hand and hung onto the door handle with the other. Xander looked down and the body of the dead man still lay where they’d left him, his wallet discarded on the floor beside him. The stake, its tip dark with blood, lay at his feet.
Xander looked up. “The keys, Spike,” he shouted. “You took some keys from the caretaker’s pocket. Maybe one of them locks the door?” He shifted, ignoring the scream of pain in his shoulder and reached past Spike to grab the door handle with both hands, while Spike groped in his pockets. After a long moment he produced a bunch of keys and Xander prayed to any deity that might listen, that the right key was there.

The first key didn’t fit. The door shuddered as Drusilla used all her strength, trying to haul it open. He could hear her curses through the thick planks of wood. The second key didn’t fit. He felt like he could almost hear the timbers screaming as she threw herself against them, and breathed a sigh of relief that the door opened inwards. Spike lifted a third key. He shoved it in the lock. Xander braced himself against the flimsy protection of the metal railing of the staircase that spiraled away below them. Spike tried the key once. It didn’t turn. The door shook and shuddered. He tried the key again. Xander felt his hands start to slip on the handle. Spike tried the key a third time. It slipped home. The tumblers clicked and rolled into place.

Xander’s hands slid off the handle and he slumped back
onto the step at Spike’s feet. Spike slid down the door, his cheek resting against it and closed his eyes.

“I don’t understand,” Xander said breathlessly. We’ve locked her in, but she’s strong. That door won’t hold her forever.”

Spike opened his eyes. Xander thought that he looked every one of his hundred plus years. “Doesn’t have to hold her for long, pet. Just for the next ten minutes or so.” He nodded back down the stairwell to the small window in the outside wall that they’d passed on the way up. “Sun’ll be up shortly. There’s no place to hide in there. That’s the beauty of a lighthouse. It lets the light out, but it also lets it in.”

Spike closed his eyes again. Xander looked around, realizing that their precarious perch at the top of the stairs was dipped in shadow and the window too far away to be a threat. He sat on the step, Spike above him and a gaping chasm below. He thought about Buffy and Giles, Dawn and Andrew. About Rosanna and Elena, and the helpless honeymoon couple on the train. About the baby slayers, gone home to be mourned by their families, and the blustering pirate in the Oxford hotel. He thought about the scholar priest
at Byland Abbey and wondered who would mourn for him. He thought about Gabriella and the tatters of his friendship with Melina. About the way Tiago’s hot blood had felt in his mouth and the way Spike’s fangs had felt in his throat as he came. Most of all he thought about Willow. About speaking to her on the phone only hours before and about Drusilla’s mocking words.

Xander sat on the step, his shoulder resting against Spike’s knee at his back and his chin on his own knee as he counted the minutes and tried not to listen to the noises coming from the other side of the door.

At his back, Spike stiffened and Drusilla wailed. Then there was silence.

They sat on the stair for endless hours, not moving. Xander kept his face forward, respecting Spike’s privacy. He watched the progress of the sun, as the shadows twisted and danced through the well of the lighthouse. He didn’t speak. In the silence he wasn’t sure if he existed any more.

When Spike eventually spoke, his voice sounded like it was coming from a thousand miles away. “You remember you asked me if I’d ever been to Lisbon before?” he said softly. “Told you me and Dru had been
there in the 30’s. There was a building there. The Casa dos Bicos it was called. ‘The House of Spikes’. It kind of made me laugh. It is a sixteenth century job, I think. Or somewhere round there, give or take a few years. All sharp edges and white stone. Dru loved it. She thought they’d built it just for us.” He paused and Xander almost felt that he could hear Spike’s heartbeat echo down the centuries in the silence. “So I didn’t tell her any different. It made her happy, so I let it be.”

Xander contemplated turning around, but then the knee at his back began to tremble. He fixed his eyes forward, staring at the blank grey wall of the tower. His fingernails dug hard into the palms of his hands.

Eventually he felt Spike move. The steps creaked eerily in the quiet of the hollow tower as he stood. Xander stood as well. Without looking back he started slowly down the steps, strangely comforted by the thump, thump, thump of Spike’s boots on the metal as they descended. At last they reached the bottom and Xander bent down next to the dead caretaker to pick up the stake. He was thankful that the tourist season had ended and the lighthouse and museum were closed. The idea of a school party discovering the carnage turned his stomach.
“Do we just leave them?” he said, staring down at the body at his feet.

“Nothing else we can do, love. We’ll phone the police once we’ve put some distance behind us, yeah?”

Nodding, Xander turned away and retraced his steps through the gift shop, past the body of the woman by the door and out into the twilight. The causeway was covered and he turned back to Spike. “You’re going to have to get your boots wet.”

“Bugger,” Spike said and walked forward into the water. He didn’t stop to see if Xander followed, just strode on, until the water was up to his calves. If he hadn’t felt so wrung out, Xander might have laughed. But he didn’t. He took off his boots, slung them around his neck and followed his Sire.

They walked the length of the causeway in silence. When they reached the end, Xander perched on a bollard at the other end and put his boots back on, while Spike muttered under his breath. The silence continued as they walked up the hill to the start of the cliff top path. Spike turned and stared back at the
lighthouse and the last light of the setting sun reflecting on the water. Xander laid a tentative hand on his arm, but Spike shook his head, turned and walked quickly past him and on along the top of the cliff.

Xander followed. It was what he did.

The car was still parked in the same spot where they’d left it the night before. It had a ticket on the windshield which Xander knew Spike wouldn’t pay. He walked wearily up to the passenger door, stopping abruptly when he saw a familiar body curled up in the seat. Her red hair spilled out over the headrest and her feet were curled up under her. Her eyes were closed. Xander’s stomach heaved and he pulled the car door open with a shaking hand and touched the side of her face.

Willow opened her eyes and smiled at him and he dropped to his knees in the dirt, his head in her lap as he fought back the tears.

She stroked his hair and he wallowed in the sensation, familiar from his earliest memories, then raised his head. “I thought you were dead. She said...” He broke off, shaking his head and hugged her tightly.
“Not dead. Just a little late. I know I said I’d stay at home, but I couldn’t leave you both up here on your own. I had to get my strength back, but a few hours ago I teleported up. I guess it took more out of me than I expected.” She looked up at Spike. “I felt her go. She was powerful; her magic was powerful and I felt it rip and disappear. I’d say I was sorry, but you know that would be a lie.”

Spike nodded. “I know. Appreciate your honesty, Witch. For the record, I’m glad you’re not dead.”

Willow snorted and kissed Xander’s forehead. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s go home.”

**Part Thirteen**

The main cemetery gate was shut when they got to Kensal Green, but they bypassed it and followed the wall to a small postern gate, almost hidden from view by a tangle of ivy and the winter stems of an old rose climber. Xander looked around to check they weren’t being watched, then settled the flowers he was carrying in the crook of his left arm. Digging in the right hand pocket of his jacket, he produced a small key, slid it into the lock and opened the door. It was the
entrance that the Watchers had used since the cemetery had been built, designed by both nature and magic to go unnoticed by visitors and passersby.

Closing the door carefully, he glanced over at Spike before following the winding path through the old gravestones to the mausoleum. The walk was soothing, comforting in a way he couldn’t quite explain. But in this place of the dead he found solace in being alive, undead, when so many others were gone. At least if he was still here, he could remember them. And he could mourn.

The cracked marble columns of the mausoleum hadn’t changed since his last visit. He wasn’t sure why they would have, but so much seemed to have happened in a scant few days, that somehow, he felt like the world had changed and that the physical landscape should have changed to keep pace, tectonic plates shifting to match the new landscape in his head.

He was rubbing his hand up and down one of the columns, wondering idly when habit turned into obsession, when a smaller white hand overlaid his own and clasped it lightly. “They’re still here, pet. They’re still safe. Told you: Victorian engineering isn’t going to
topple just because you turn your back for a few days.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Well, that was unexpected.” Xander looked back questioningly. “You agreeing with me. It doesn’t happen very often.”

“Maybe I’m tired of being predictable.” A ghost of a smile flickered across his face and he pulled his hand out of Spike’s grasp and held it out. “Come on, give me the key. I know you’ve got it.”

Spike snorted, but he fished in the pocket of his coat, pulled out the large, ornate key and handed it over. Xander put it into the lock, turned it and pushed the well oiled door open. Stooping, he picked up the bouquet of lilies that was lying at his feet and walked slowly into the gloom. Spike followed, pausing to light the single candle by the door.

Xander knelt in front of the far wall. He took the dead flowers from the vase on the floor and laid them aside. Stem by stem, he placed the lilies into the vase that never seemed to run out of fresh water. He suspected Willow had something to do with that, but he’d never
felt the need to ask. When the flowers were arranged to his satisfaction, he contemplated the white plaques that made up the bottom row in the wall of remembrance: Buffy Summers, Dawn Summers, Rupert Giles and Andrew Wells. Out of habit, he traced his fingers across the names, starting with Andrew and finishing with Buffy, but his hand lingered over Giles’ name as he remembered a body stuffed without pity into the trunk of a car. “We got her,” he whispered. “I’m sorry it took so long. I’m sorry I couldn’t do it sooner.” He paused and glanced back to where Spike stood impassively by the door. He turned back to face the wall. To face the plaques, and the names, and the dates that proved that they had lived. And that they had died. “I couldn’t do it in the end. Spike had to do it. I don’t know if he’ll ever forgive me for that,” he said softly, almost to himself.

“There’s nothing to forgive.” Spike’s voice was quiet, but Xander swallowed hard, stood slowly and turned. He shook his head, for once bereft of words.

“Come on,” Spike said, nodding his head towards the outside. “Walk with me. I’ve got something to show you.”
Xander glanced back at the wall of white plaques and bent to pick up the dead lilies. He passed Spike, watching until he’d snuffed out the candle and locked the door behind them. Placing the flowers in the wire basket bin nearby, Xander stood and waited.

“This way.” Spike took the path to the right, winding his way between well tended marble and granite gravestones, until he skirted the back of a small chapel and walked towards a small block of graves that were marked by a drunken huddle of fallen stones. At the far end, there was a gravestone embedded in the ground, its edges overgrown and the sandstone covered in lichen. Spike stopped and stood in front of it, his head bowed. Xander came to a halt beside him. He wanted to ask why they had stopped, but Spike seemed content to stand in silence. Xander could only give him back the gift of respect and restraint that Spike had offered him, whenever they’d visited the cemetery over the past year.

Courtesy and curiosity warred in his soul. Eventually he broke the silence. “Why here?” he asked.

Chuckling, Spike hunkered down, then looked up at Xander. “Wondered how long it would take you to ask.
You did better than I expected.” He brushed the dirt off the sandstone and scraped at the lichen, gradually revealing the worn writing underneath. “This is the grave of Guillaume de Blanc”

“Who?”

“William the White.” Spike grinned up at Xander. “Otherwise known as me.”

“This is your grave?” Xander said incredulously. “All this time we’ve been visiting the cemetery and you didn’t come?”

“Not much point, love.” Spike shrugged his shoulders, but his fingers traced over the sandstone, clearing it of dirt and moss and the overgrown grass around the edges. “No point laying flowers on the grave of a dead man when he’s still walking around.”

“I don’t understand.” Xander wondered if he should hunker down, to be on Spike’s level, but somehow he felt as if it would be intruding even more on something so personal.

Spike chuckled again. “Not much to understand,” he
said. “After I’d been turned for a while, Dru wanted to bury me. Make a marker of the passing of William and the birth of Spike. She decided I needed a grave.”

“Guillaume de Blanc?” Xander asked, trying not to sound dubious and failing miserably.

“Always the romantic, was Dru. She wanted to bury the poet. Bury the virgin. Bury the Victorian. She wanted something grandiose and ridiculous. So we chose a ridiculous name. William the White... William the virgin. William, the bloody awful poet.”

Xander closed his eye briefly, imagining Drusilla and a very young Spike laughing as they buried the past. A thought flitted through his head and he opened his eye and grinned down at Spike. “I guess it could have been worse,” he said. “She could have called you Saruman, or maybe Gandalf.”

“Git,” Spike replied, but there was no rancor in his tone. “Anyway, Tolkien wasn’t born then, so watch your lip.”

“Yes Spike,” Xander said with a smile. He gazed down at Spike, hunkered in front of the empty grave and he
shivered as the meaning of the scene sank down from his brain and into his bones. “Thank you,” he said.

“For what?” Spike asked curiously.

“For trusting me. For showing me this. For helping me over the last year, when you could have turned your back.” Xander looked out blindly into the dark before making himself look back at Spike. “For doing the one thing that must have hurt you most. For killing Dru.”

Spike rose to his feet, wiping the dirt off his jeans and his hands. He stood directly in front of Xander and shook his head. “I didn’t kill Dru. She killed herself. She knew she wasn’t walking out of there. She knew we were never going to come over.”

Xander opened his mouth to speak, but Spike held a finger to Xander’s lips, silencing him before he could start. “The choice of the lighthouse wasn’t an accident. It wasn’t a tactical mistake. She knew. She was a seer. She saw her own death and she chose her own end. Her gift and her curse to us, was making us be there. To give her what she wanted. She’s probably laughing in hell.”
Shivering at the thought, Xander pulled his coat closer around himself. “What happens now?” he said hesitantly.

“Now?” Spike raised an eyebrow.

“With us?”

“Us?”

“I mean, Sire and childe. Big bad and former Scooby. Spike and the half blind donut boy. What happens now?”

“What do you want to happen?”

“I don’t know.” Xander hunched his shoulders. “I want us to be friends. We’ve come through too much. Shared too much not to be. I want...I want to see what happens next. We’ve got so much time in front of us and I don’t know what’s going to happen. But I want to see where it goes.” He bent his head and then looked up, peering at Spike through the tangle of his hair. “Show me what it means. What it means to be who we are. What we are. Show me what it could mean.”
Spike reached up and ran a hand through the untidy hair, his finger trailing slowly along Xander’s jaw and down over the remnants of the bite mark on his neck. “I can do that, love. I can show what it means.”

Xander nodded, knowing that if he was still human he’d be blushing, but instead he smiled and Spike smiled back.

Together, they turned their back on the uncared for, overgrown grave and threaded their way through the tangle of headstones. They passed by the side of the Watcher’s mausoleum and Xander ran his hand along the old stone, feeling its weight, and solidity, and strength. He knew that he would be back. Perhaps not next week, or the week after, but he would be back.

He knew that the people inside would understand.

The End