

Always 1 - Blaze of Glory

Xander woke with a start, his hands instinctively going to the old six shooter in his lap. He had 'borrowed' it from his Uncle Rory a few hours ago. He knew that sleeping out in the open was almost an open invitation to be eaten, but he could not face going home again. He sighed tiredly, wondering how he was going to get through the day.

He unrolled the old coat he had used for a pillow and stood, stretching. He winced as the bright Californian sunlight burnt his eyes.

He looked at his watch, he was wearing the present from Willow all those years ago. It was nearly time for school. He trudged slowly, convinced that his would be his last day on earth.

He was alone as he walked. Willow and Oz were 'panicing', Buffy was recovering in hospital, with Giles watching over her. At their graduation this afternoon, Mayor Richard Wilkins III was planning to become an immortal demon.

Xander knew that they would not be able to stop him, the Mayor had been planning this for too many years to be stopped at this last point.

I wake up in the morning
And I raise my weary head
I've got an old coat for a pillow
And the earth was last night's bed
I don't know where I'm going
Only God knows where I've been
I'm a devil on the run
A six gun lover
A candle in the wind

When Xander had eventually arrived home, earlier this morning, his parents had been arguing again. He had stopped by the door, then decided he could not face his last night on earth with them. About all they had done for him was give birth and feed him.

"Come on, Baby" Jack whispered, kissing his girlfriend hard.

"Jack, stop it," she whined, her voice sounding slurred. "I don't wanna do this."

"Sure you do," Jack said, pulling back. He passed her the toke they had been smoking.

She inhaled hard, drawing the smoke into her lungs. Her head rolled back as she half passed out.

Jack grinned and moved over her.

"You got her pregnant." Jonathan Thomas said, sounding disgusted. "Now, You're going to marry her."

"What?" Jack exclaimed, shocked. He turned to look at his father, who shook his head, telling him he had no choice. Jack slumped back in chair, shaking his head.

"You have a son," his father told him. He shrugged, "She can name him, I don't care."

His father frowned and sighed, for some reason he felt worried for his grandson. "She named him Alexander."

"Where have you been, Xander?" Willow demanded, then ignored him before he could answer. "I've got your graduation clothes here."

"Thanks Wills" he said with a smile.

When you're brought into this world

They say you're born in sin
Well at least they gave me something
I didn't have to steal or have to win
Well they tell me that I'm wanted
Yeah, I'm a wanted man
I'm a colt in your stable
I'm what Cain was to Abel
Mister catch me if you can

Xander saw Anya running down the hall.

"Anya, wait!" Xander shouted, "Where you going?"

"Anywhere. If there's a lunar shuttle going up anytime soon, I'm on it."

"We need you here. You might be able to help."

"Or I might be able to live. You can't stop the Ascension."

"We have to try, we can't just give in."

Anya paused for a second, "I'm thousands of years old, I'm not going to loose all that now. Come with me, think of your future, what it would be like to be old."

Xander sighed softly, "I'm not convinced I'm going to see tomorrow, never mind ten years time."

"What about sex, Xander? We could go somewhere, have lots of hiding sex, come back when it's over."

Xander's smile twisted as he looked at her in complete disbelief. "Go Anya," he said calmly, turning away and walking back to the library.

As he walked, he thought of Cordelia, the girl he had betrayed. He thought about Buffy, the girl who controlled his heart, even though she didn't seem to care. He realised he couldn't let them die, he couldn't let the mayor succeed.

He ducked out of a side door, running to his car.

He arrived home minutes later, bursting through the door. His fathers drunk voice yelled something at him, but he ignored it. He ran into his room, carelessly thowing the bed to one side. He pulled up the flooring, revealing the plastic explosive he had stolen along with the rocket launcher.

'I knew this would come in handy' he whispered to himself.

You ask about my conscience
And I offer you my soul
You ask if I'll grow to be a wise man
Well I ask if I'll grow old
You ask me if I've known love
And what it's like to sing songs in the rain
Well, I've seen love come
And I've seen it shot down
I've seen it die in vain

It wasn't working. Buffy had just jumped out of the window. The explosion was supposed to happen next, but it hadn't. Xander looked around, searching. Giles was desperately pressing the plunger. The students were still fighting hand to hand with the vampires. They fought for their lives, and for the first time, revenge.

He swore loudly, a giant snake, which was the newly ascended mayor, came slithering back out of the school.

"Buffy!" he yelled, pointing, before being distracted by a vampire attacking him. He ducked, then stood up as fast as he could, jamming the stake in his hand into the vampires chest.

As Buffy got close to the snake, it whipped it's tail around, sending her flying. She landed against a wall, her hand banging and slumped down, unable to move.

"God, give me the strength to do this," Xander prayed, taking a deep breath.

The giant snake reared back, then swallowed one of the students whole. The others screamed, backing away, starting to panic.

"Stand firm," Xander screamed, "Fire your cross bows at him. Give me time."

The students obeyed him, trusting him as they had since the start.

Small fires had broken out across the field, causing smoke to fill the area.

Xander met Giles's eyes, he gave him a half salute, then started to run, tearing off his graduation gown.

Giles shouted something, but Xander couldn't hear, didn't want to hear.

Willow watched him run directly at the giant snake, and screamed as well.

"Hey, snake face," Xander shouted, pulling out his six-shooter again. "Down here, come on, eat me, I'm full of twinkies, very sweet." He shot at the giant serpent, drawing its attention as it screamed in pain, the heavy pullets piercing its skin.

The Mayor responded, rearing up and striking down at Xander.

Buffy's head cleared, she managed to stand, only to see the Snake bearing down on Xander, she took a step, another, trying desperately to get there, to save him.

Xander stared up at his death and did the only thing he could. He grinned. He moved his hand, grasping the detonator to the plastic explosives he had wrapped around his body.

There was a seconds stillness as everyone watched, unable to believe that Xander was gone.

A second later, a huge explosion knocked everyone back as the Snake exploded from the inside. The explosion finally set off the diesel fuel and fertilisers inside the school. Xander's death was marked with a fiery blaze that illuminated the sky for miles around.

Each night I go to bed
I pray the Lord my soul to keep
No I ain't looking for forgiveness
But before I'm six foot deep
Lord, I got to ask a favour
And hope you'll understand
'Cause I've lived life to the fullest
Let this boy die like a man
Staring down a bullet
Let me make my final stand

Buffy fell to her knees, her eyes fixed on the spot she had last seen him. Her mind refused to process what had happened.

Giles slowly walked over to her, dropping down on to his knees. He hugged her silently.

Willow and Oz walked up, Willow was crying as Oz supported her.

Through the smoke, two firmen were helping Wesley into an ambulance. "If I could... could just get something for the pain. It's rather a lot of pain, actually. Aspirin? If you would... uh... ah..." he groaned as they lifted him. "Perhaps I could just be knocked unconscious?"

"He doesn't know, Giles" Oz said, correctly reading the expression on the librarians face.

Giles nodded slowly, turning his head away.

Jonathan approached them, looking a little nervous.

"Hi, Xander asked me to," he started, then rubbed his eyes. "Xander asked me to give you this, if he didn't make it."

He held out a white envelope. Willow grabbed it, tearing it open. Jonathan nodded slowly, then turned, leaving them to their grief.

"Hey Guys," Willow read aloud.

"I figure that if you're reading this, something went wrong, and key-guy had to put the back-up plan into action.

Before I forget, if you can find the gun I had, return it to my uncle Rory. I kinda borrowed it without permission.

I've not got long to write this, the mayor's speech is due to kick off soon.

Willow, I love you, I always have. Stick with Oz, he's a good guy.

Cordy, I'm sorry. I had a really good thing and I blew it. Its one of the few big regrets I have.

Giles, (yeah, I didn't call you g-man) as hard as this is to say to another man, I love you. You looked out for me, when those that birthed me didn't.

Buffy, I love you, I never stopped.

Well, someone's shouting my name,

Love ya,

X

Ps, if Anya shows up again, don't be too hard on her. Deep down she's a nice person..honest.

Pps, Congrats. You survived. High School is finally over."

Willow finished reading and threw herself back into Oz's arms. She started to cry again, holding him tight.

Buffy did the same, hugging Giles tonight, still unable to believe that Xander was gone.

Cordelia just stood there, stunned, tears slowly dripping down her face.

Somehow, the victory didn't seem to matter any more.

Shot down in a blaze of glory
Take me now but know the truth
I'm going out in a blaze of glory
Lord I never drew first
But I drew first blood
And I'm no one's son
Call me young gun
I'm a young gun

Always 2 - Keep The Faith

"Oh, Buffy," Joyce Summers sighed softly. She enfolded her arms around her daughter, hugging her tightly.

"He's gone, Mom," Buffy sobbed against her mother's shoulder.

"I know, I know" Joyce said, stroking her child's back slowly, trying to soothe her.

"I couldn't, I tried, I couldn't get there," Buffy hiccupped through her tears. "One minute everything was going so well, I was out of the school, Giles was about to press the plunger, then it all went wrong. Nothing happened."

Buffy took a deep breath, before continuing. Her tears ran unabated down her cheeks.

"The Mayor exploded out of the building, faster than I thought possible, he'd turned into a giant snake. I attacked him, but I couldn't hurt him. He just flipped me away like I was nothing. Nothing! When I looked up, Xander was screaming for people to give him time.

"I saw him run, through the smoke and I tried to stand, but I just couldn't. He shouted at the snake; I couldn't hear what he said. I managed to get up, I took a step, I tried to save him, I did!" She insisted frantically.

Joyce frowned as Buffy's voice neared hysterical levels. She tightened her hold on her daughter, trying to hold her together physically; while praying it would help her mentally.

"Xander looked at me as the snake reared up, and he smiled, and then he shot at the snake. He got its attention." Buffy shook her head, trying to deny the image she passing all to vividly through her mind. "As the snake came down on him, he winked at me - he winked at me. Mom; he knew he was about to die, but he wanted to reassure me.

"The snake pulled back up, Xander was gone. Everything seemed to go quiet, it was like all the fighting stopped. Then the snake just exploded, bits of it went everywhere. The explosion set off the trap we had made in the high school, and blew that up as well."

Buffy pulled away from her mothers embrace, looking her directly in her eyes. Her tears seemed to stop.

"He had written us a note, Mom. He knew he was going to have save us if something went wrong. We had no back-up plan, we were beaten. Xander saved us, he saved the world. He was a hero, Mom. I don't know what to do now."

Buffy's tears started again, burying her face back against her mother's shoulder, desperately seeking direction and reassurance.

"Honey, " Joyce said quietly, whispering into her little girl's ear. "I know you don't want to hear this, but Xander died doing what he wanted, saving his friends. He lived for you, and was ready to die for you. Sometimes you can't win without a huge sacrifice."

Joyce's words ran out as she was overcome, trying to deal with her own grief while comforting her daughter. It was too much for her; she held her daughter and cried with her, crying for a boy who gave his all, so that others might not have to.

Mother, mother, tell your children,
That their time has just begun.
I have suffered for my anger.
There are wars that can't be won.

"Giles, (yeah, I didn't call you G-man) as hard as this is to say to another man, I love you. You cared about me and looked out for me, when those that birthed me didn't."

The words ran around in Giles' head again and again, an endless mantra. He sat, alone, in a large armchair in his living room. He had a book perched on his lap, but he was ignoring it. He silently contemplated the glass in his hand, the whisky amber in the dim light.

For a man who spent his life dealing with Hell, Giles had very little faith in heaven. He had seen too much pain and suffering, too much evil in his life to really believe in a merciful and compassionate God. For the first time in over twenty years, Giles hoped he was wrong. So he prayed. He prayed for Xander, and in the end, he prayed for himself and for the others, that they might enjoy what Xander had given them.

Father, father, please believe me,

I am laying down my guns.
I am broken like an arrow.
Forgive me.
Forgive your wayward son.

Cordelia Chase lay on her bed in a small apartment. She planned to leave Sunnydale, to become an actress. She was beautiful, she knew that. She knew she'd be able to make it.

She looked around her room, at the barrenness of it. She compared it to the luxury of her upbringing, and for the first time, she didn't care.

A single tear slowly appeared in the corner of her eye. It dripped off her eyelash and slowly slid its way down her cheek, to her chin, where it dripped off and landed on her pillow.

"Oh, Xander," she whispered softly. "I'm sorry."

She looked up at the ceiling, hoping that Xander would be able to hear her.

"I never said I forgave you, I just hid myself from you. You reached me like no one else. Even at the end, you gave me everything you had.

"I knew about Buffy, Xan. I knew you were in love with her. You always thought you hid it, but you couldn't, not from me. I felt your heart beat that little bit faster when she was near. It was why we spent so much time in the closets; I knew that I had your complete attention then. I'm not accusing you Xander, just explaining that I understand and forgive you.

"I shouldn't be here; I should be dead, along with everyone else. Thank you. Thank you for my life. I'm going to take it, I'm going to L.A. to be an actress. I'm going to make it Xan, and it will all be thanks to you."

Cordelia turned over, burying her face in the soft pillows. She fell asleep seconds later, imagining a soft hand brushing her hair back.

Tell me, baby, when I hurt you.
Do you keep it all inside?
Do you tell me all's forgiven,
And just hide behind your pride?

"They said it was a gas leak," Willow said softly.

Daniel "Oz" Osbourne nodded silently.

"But it wasn't, it was Xander," she continued. "He doesn't deserve that, he deserves to have everyone know what happened. He deserves to be recognised as a true hero."

Oz slid his arms back around his girlfriend, holding her tightly. Willow rested her head on his shoulder, still too numb to cry.

"I can't believe he's gone," she admitted finally, trying to gather the courage to talk about her best friend.

"I know, Willow," Oz said quietly. A man of few words, he was shaken up internally.

"When we kissed, we knew it was wrong, but for once, we wanted to kiss each other. We thought we were going to die," Willow rambled, not noticing as Oz tensed. "I'll never regret that, because it meant that we finally knew. After the growing up, after my crush on him, we finally knew. We loved each other completely, but we weren't in love. We kissed as passionately as we could, but when you interrupted, we knew. We knew that we weren't meant for each other like that, we were meant to be the best of friends for eternity.

"That's why I could be with you Oz, because I knew finally. Xander gave me peace and closure, and the biggest gift of all, his friendship."

She looked up at her boyfriend, her eyes begging him to understand what she was trying to say.

"You'll always love him, but you're not in love with him?" Oz summarised briefly.

Willow nodded, resting her head back down, her mind refusing to let her think about what had happened.

Walking in the footsteps
Of society's lies,
I don't like what I see no more,
Sometimes I wish that I was blind.

It was only a gradual lightening of the ambient light that told Buffy it was dawn. She looked out at the cold dark weather; an unusual heavy rain was beating down on the window ledge and the roof. It fit her mood completely.

Buffy hadn't slept; she hadn't talked at all night. She looked down at her mother, sleeping on the couch, then smiled gently and covered her with a blanket.

Buffy slipped on a pair of sneakers and pulled her hair back into a loose pony-tail. She walked out of the house, trudging slowly towards the school, needing to see it one last time.

She arrived minutes later and stood, staring at the spot she had last seen Xander, the place he had smiled at her and winked.

She was joined minutes later by Giles. The normally immaculate watcher looked the worse for wear. He had not shaved, and was still wearing the same clothes he had worn the day before.

Cordelia arrived next, her face bare of makeup, wearing old jeans and a tee shirt.

They stood and stared, each alone in their grief, yet comforted by the presence of others.

Willow and Oz soon joined them, holding each other carefully.

"I feel I should say something," Giles whispered, his voice barely audible.

The others turned and looked at him. His heart broke as he saw the despair in each of his young ones' eyes. He had wanted to protect them from this, to not allow them to join the fight. But now, he was exceedingly glad he had been forced to do so; the kinship he felt with each of them was like nothing he had experienced.

"I was going to make a speech, saying goodbye properly," Giles began, a little sad laugh in his throat, "but we all know that Xander would have hated it."

Giles took off his glasses, absently polishing them. "So I'll keep it short. Thank you, for my life, for the life of everyone on this planet. You saved the world, and you will never be forgotten."

Giles replaced his glasses, ignoring the tears running down his cheek.

Cordelia looked up, catching the rain on her face. "I was wrong, Xan, you weren't the Zeppo, you never were." She fell silent again, unable to say anymore.

"You were cool, Xander." Oz announced, his face suddenly expressive. "You gave me my everything, dude." Oz took a deep breath, desperately fighting for the control he normally found so easy.

Buffy turned, moving towards Willow. The redhead released her hold on Oz, grabbing on to Buffy desperately. They sank to their knees, uncaring of the puddle they were kneeling in.

"I miss him," Willow said, unable to process anymore than that.

"I know. I do too," Buffy replied.

"I loved him, he was my brother."

"I'll never know," Buffy admitted finally, Xander's last words to her were indelibly etched on her brain. "I hope that I would have eventually looked at him for what he was, not what he claimed to be."

Buffy sighed softly, "I'll never know."

Willow looked at her best friend. "He's gone, hasn't he?" she asked, tremulously.

Buffy nodded, suddenly finding more tears.

The damn burst for Willow, as she hugged Buffy tightly, the tears cascading down her face.

Sometimes I wait forever
To stand out in the rain,
So no one sees me cryin',
Trying to wash away the pain.

"What do we do now, Giles?" Buffy asked from the ground.

"We keep going, we have to have faith that we are doing the right thing."

Cordelia nodded, agreeing. "We have to keep the faith."

Mother, father,
There's things I've done I can't erase.

Every night we fall from grace,
It's hard with the world in your face,
Trying to hold on, trying to hold on.

Faith: you know you're gonna live thru the rain,
Lord, you got to keep the faith.

Faith: don't let your love turn to hate,
Right now we got to keep the faith.

Faith: now it's not too late,
Try to hold on, trying to hold on,
Keep the faith.

Always 3 - Always

Xander couldn't decide if he was in heaven or hell. He'd always thought that there would be a distinct difference. In one place there would be the chorus of angels singing Gods praises. In the other, small men dressed in red, sticking pitchforks in places pitchforks don't normally go.

He was not in any physical pain; he certainly didn't feel hot. He hadn't smelt any sulphur recently, either. He was warm, comfortable, safe. He had nearly everything he wanted. And that was the problem.

The window in the corner of his room was showing what it always did, so he settled down for another round of Buffy watching, his main hobby since his unfortunate incident involving a few pounds of plastic explosives and a giant snake.

Buffy was older now, and wore more respectable clothes, to his eternal disappointment. Which brought up another issue. Xander was growing older as well. He had never been truly religious, but he remembered hearing a lot from his religious instructors about the soul being eternal.

< How can the soul be eternal if I continue to age? > he asked himself, watching the problems the Slayer was having with a Hellgod named Glory.

He sighed softly; it was torture being able to watch her all the time, but never really see her, never talk to her, touch her.

He was alone, as he had been since his death.

This romeo is bleeding,
But you can't see his blood.
It's nothing but some feelings
That this old dog kicked up.

"I don't think I'm going to make it, this time, Xan," Buffy Summers whispered softly to the tombstone in front of her.

Once a week, since Xander had died, Buffy had followed the same ritual. She would finish her patrol, then sit by Xander's grave till the sun came up, telling him about everything she had done during that week. Over the years she had told him about demons and boyfriends, about happiness and pain. Now she was talking about despair.

"We don't know how to stop her, she's so powerful!"

As always when Buffy talked to Xander, she could hear him inside, giving her a pep talk, encouraging her, telling her she could do it.

As the sun rose over the horizon, signalling a new day, Buffy turned to the gravestone.

"I still miss you. There's a huge Xander shaped whole in my heart, that nothing's been able to fill," she whispered, staring at the tombstone.

A feeling of warmth swept through her, a feeling she had started to call a 'Xander hug from beyond' a year ago.

"Thanks, Xan," she whispered, a soft smile on her face.

She walked away from the graveyard, into a new day, determined to continue to live her life.

It's been raining since you left me,
Now I'm drowning in the flood.
You see I've always been a fighter
But without you I give up.

Xander frowned; it was raining outside. It had not rained since he had arrived.

His attention was diverted back to the window, seeing Buffy fighting Glory on the top of some scaffolding.

A loud thunder crack outside seemed to occur just above the house that had been his home for the past two years.

Deciding to go out and look, Xander put on a coat that hadn't been there a second before and went outside. As he did, he missed Buffy kneeling in

front of her sister, Dawn. He missed her last words, as the Slayer turned and dove into the portal Glory had created.

Xander tried to remain upright in the buffeting wind. Lightning exploded around him, creating huge craters in the once pristine ground.

A swirling ball of energy formed above him, a dark hole suddenly appearing in the centre of it.

Curiously, Xander wasn't scared, he knew he had to be here. He didn't understand how he knew, but the knowledge was reassuring all the same.

There was a sudden silence as if he stood in the eye of a storm. The small hairs on the back of Xander's neck stood to attention.

Xander held his breath. It seemed that his entire universe did. The feeling of waiting was palpable.

The sense of eternity was smashed. With a huge flash of bright light, a figure fell through the hole. It didn't take Xander a second to recognise it. The blond hair was enough. He dived forwards, catching the body.

The weight caused him to overbalance, he tripped and tried desperately to spin his body around. He succeeded, but ended up on his back in the mud, with Buffy sprawled on top of him.

Buffy carefully opened her tightly closed eyes. Something was unexpected.

She had dived through the Hellgod's portal, expecting to die, to maybe go to heaven. She did not expect the feeling of arms, strong arms, holding her tightly against a chest. A strong chest. < Well, this is a good start, > she admitted to herself.

She opened her eyes fully and slowly looked up, into the worried eyes of the person holding her.

"Xander?" she gasped, tensing her muscles, readying herself in case he was a vampire or demon.

He grinned, a lopsided grin that brought back a thousand memories for her.

"Hey Buff, what brings you here?"

Buffy decided that laying on Xander at the moment probably wasn't the best place to have this conversation, no matter how comfortable it was.

She stood, then offered him her hand. He smiled up at her, and took her hands. Buffy pulled, then looked shocked as Xander pulled back, matching her strength.

He smirked at her, then allowed her to pull him up.

"Come on, Buff. You've probably got a million questions. Let's go inside and sit down. I think we've got a very long time ahead of us."

Buffy frowned at his comment, unsure of his meaning. She followed him as they walked the short distance to the small house she had only just now noticed.

Xander entered, hanging his coat on coat rack that suddenly appeared for him.

Buffy froze in the doorway. "Xander?"

"Hmm?" Xander asked, slightly distracted.

"That coat rack just appeared," Buffy stated. The look on her face reminded Xander that first and foremost, she was a Slayer.

"It's OK, Buffy. That happens a lot, you don't have to slay it."

Turning to a table, so she wouldn't freak, Xander turned back and offered her a cup of hot chocolate. "Take a seat," he invited.

She sat down in a straight-backed chair, warily regarding the entire room as she took the cup he offered.

Xander relaxed in a large comfy armchair.

"Shoot," he said casually, inviting her to ask him the questions he knew she had. He held his own mug in front of him, warming his fingers.

Buffy took a deep breath, trying hard to ignore all the strange things in front of her.

She decided to start simple. "Where am I?"

"Heaven. Well, close to it anyway," Xander answered immediately. "Although I wasn't sure till you arrived."

"What do you mean?"

"Without you, there was something missing. When you arrived, you filled that gap."

"Wait a second," a frown appeared on Buffy's face. "Are you telling me that I am in your heaven. I'm here to make eternity good for you?"

She started to get angry, not liking this at all.

"NO!" Xander said forcefully, moving suddenly so he could look directly into her eyes.

"That isn't how it works." He took a deep breath, wondering how to explain the knowledge he suddenly knew. "We aren't quite in heaven. We're just below heaven, a place where everything is available for us. We're here until we decide how we are going to spend eternity."

He held up his hand, stopping her before she could question him. "Let me finish! Don't jump to conclusions. This place is where we choose. Eternity is forever, the choices we make here will affect us for the rest of existence. You have complete freedom of choice here. When you decide that you want to go, you simply walk out that door, and you'll be gone, into your own heaven. You were just brought here first because I am still here."

Buffy tilted her head, looking at Xander quizzically. "What would you choose if I left?"

Xander waggled his eyebrows and leered at her, "The women of Baywatch."

She laughed, then moved to hug him.

"I missed you, Xand," she said quietly.

Buffy couldn't explain why she was accepting everything he said so easily, she put it down to being near to heaven and the feeling that Xander was telling the complete truth; she was free to walk out the door.

"How long do we have to choose?"

Xander smiled. "As long as we need, Buffy. There's no time limit."

She smiled, releasing him from her hug and settled back. "So we just wish for things and they appear?" she asked, going back to the coat rack she had seen earlier.

"Not quite, it's more-" Xander paused, trying to explain in the easiest manner. He decided to demonstrate.

He moved his hand down, at the same time saying, "it's more like you believe that there is a rose on the floor, there always has been a rose on the floor, and when you raise your hand," Xander moved in time with his words, pulling up a single red rose and handing it to her. "A rose is there," he finished.

Buffy looked confused, not understanding.

"We create our own reality here, everything we think can be changed into action," Xander smiled. "Do me a favour, Buff, pass me that book behind the chair."

Buffy automatically put her hand behind the chair, pulling out a book.

"This one?" she asked.

Xander smirked at her, "Of course, you just created it."

Buffy threw the book at him, then smiled. She reached behind the chair again, this time pulling out a large tub of chocolate ice cream.

Xander didn't notice that the window he had used to watch Buffy was now simply a ordinary window.

Now I can't sing a love song,
Like the way it's meant to be,
Well, I guess I'm not that good anymore,
But baby, that's just me.
And I will love you, baby - Always.
And I'll be there forever and a day - Always.
I'll be there till the stars don't shine,
Till the heavens burst and
The words don't rhyme.
And I know when I die, you'll be on my mind,
And I'll love you - Always.

Willow walked slowly around the two gravestones. It had seemed fitting to bury Buffy next to Xander; they had both saved the world with their sacrifices.

In her hand was a picture, a photograph taken on the steps of Sunnydale High many years ago. It showed all of them, laughing.

"I miss you both, so much," she whispered, "I've cried more tears than I thought would be possible."

She took one more look at the picture, then made her decision.

"I've found a spell, guys. Because of the way you died, Buffy, I can bring you back. We need you, I need you. I'm so sorry I can't bring you back too, Xan.

Buffy was laughing hysterically as Xander repeated the snoopy dance for her. Having lost at cards, this was his forfeit. He was laughing pretty hard as well, which was ruining his coordination even more.

"Xander," Buffy said, suddenly changing tone.

"Yes?" Xander asked, picking up on the mood change, moving in front of her.

"I've been thinking about this eternity thing."

Xander nodded, a knot of worry forming in his stomach.

"I've decided that I can't really make a decision about how I spend eternity without all the facts," she said calmly.

"What do you mean?" asked Xander, now very worried.

Buffy looked at him, her face as expressionless as she could make it. "It's hardly proper to ask a girl to spend eternity with you, without at least kissing her first."

Xander blinked. He ran that previous statement through his mind again, trying to make sense of it.

"What?" he asked, a little stupidly.

Buffy laughed, then said through a large smile. "I don't know how long we've been here, but I've enjoyed it. We've talked, we've laughed, we've helped each other. So, of the three things I think I need for eternity, you have the sense of humour thing, you have the understanding and supportive partner thing, and now I need to know if you have the passion thing."

Xander looked at her. "You've been thinking about this a lot, haven't you?"

Buffy just smiled.

Now your pictures that you left behind
Are just memories of a different life,
Some that made us laugh, some that made us cry.
One that made you have to say goodbye.
What I'd give to run my fingers through your hair,
To touch your lips, to hold you near.
When you say your prayers, try to understand.
I've made mistakes, I'm just a man.

Buffy slowly moved towards Xander. He opened his arms, engulfing her in his embrace. She brought her lips up to his, and gently pressed them against his.

They kissed, very gently at first, experiencing the feeling of each other's kiss. As they found they both liked it, they slowly increased the passion behind it, taking each other to a new level, then pausing, letting the other back out if they wanted to.

Neither did.

Within minutes they were both kissing each other passionately. They fell over, Xander laying on top of Buffy. He kissed her harder, grinding himself against her. She gasped, sliding her legs up, wrapping them around him, pulling tighter as she kissed him back. He moaned against her lips; she swallowed the sound of his pleasure, pulling everything he had against her.

Slowly, they broke the kiss, breathing heavily, looking at each other.

She smiled up at him. "I think I'm going to need to conduct a longer experiment. Just to make sure I make the right decisions," Buffy teased gently.

"K," Xander said, unable to remove the silly grin from his face.

When he holds you close, when he pulls you near,
When he says the words you've been needing to hear,
I'll wish I was him 'cause those words are mine,
To say to you till the end of time.

Yeah, I will love you, baby - Always.
And I'll be there forever and a day - Always.

Buffy rolled them both over, sitting on Xander's stomach, tracing patterns on his chest with her fingers. He looked up at her, smiling into her eyes.

"Xan-" Buffy started, before being interrupted by the roof of the house suddenly blowing off as huge portal abruptly appeared, sucking Buffy in to it.

"Buffy!" Xander yelled, leaping up, grabbing her hands, desperately trying to hang on to her.

Buffy screamed, holding on to Xander, her feet waving in the air as the portal tried to suck her back through it.

"Let me go, Xan," she yelled. "Don't let it take you as well."

"No!" Xander growled, "Where you go, I go." With that, Xander jumped, holding Buffy tightly as they were sucked straight into the portal yawning above them.

If you told me to cry for you.
I could,
If you told me to die for you.
I would,
Take a look at my face.
There's no price I won't pay,
To say these words to you.

Buffy was angry. She muttered to herself, waving her hands wildly, as she stalked towards Giles' house, guessing that they would all be there.

She had just had to dig herself out of her own grave.

When she finally reached the surface, the first thing she had noticed was Xander's grave next to hers. She had dug down, hoping beyond hope that he would be there, that he would have come through the portal with her. The bitter wind dug into her skin as she moved the earth, finally coming to his coffin.

With a heave, the Slayer opened it. To find it empty.

A wave of desolation hit her, and she started to cry, as she realised Xander had no body left to come back to.

So she began walking, finding her way to Giles' apartment and opening the door.

Willow and Tara were sitting on the couch, Giles in a chair, while Spike was standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

"Buffy," Willow whispered, before yelling, "Buffy!" She launched herself at her friend, hugging her tightly.

Spike watched the slayer, noticing something different about her, an air of depression and desolation that hung around her like a psychic second skin. He smiled to himself, realising the possibilities that the situation offered; maybe he'd be able to manipulate this to his advantage. Maybe the Slayer would finally be his.

Hearing the commotion, Dawn walked out of the bedroom where she had been sleeping. She took one look at Buffy, blinked, then leaped at her, hugging her as tightly as Willow was.

"Oh, God, I'm so glad you're back, I can't believe it," Dawn babbled excitedly, drowning out Willow's own excited chatter.

Seeing how happy they were dissolved Buffy's anger. She didn't know where Xander was, she didn't even know if he survived. She decided that she would talk to Willow about it tomorrow, to get her to help try and find Xander.

She locked up her tears, unable to explain her sadness while she was being welcomed back by the others.

Well, there ain't no luck
In these loaded dice.
But, baby, if you give me just one more try,
We can pack up our old dreams
And our old lives.
We'll find a place where the sun still shines.

"Where were you, Buffy?" Giles' English accent cut through the babbling.

Buffy took a deep breath, about to lie, unable to think straight, when there was a frantic pounding at the door.

She frowned and opened it a little, only for it to be knocked out of her grasp as a naked man dived through the gap, leaped over the couch, grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around himself.

Willow, Tara, Giles and Dawn's relative jaws each hit the ground at the same time.

"Xander?" Willow asked softly, unable to believe her eyes.

"Oh, it's you," Spike said casually from the corner.

"Vampire!" Xander shouted, noticing Spike. He grabbed a spare stake from the table and ran at the vampire. Spike raised a fist to defend himself, but his microchip, implanted by a secret government project, prevented him from harming a human. He yelled, clutching his head in agony. Xander didn't pause, he simply staked the vampire. Spike looked shocked, then literally fell apart, his dust lightly scattering across the floor of the kitchen where he had been standing.

There was total silence in the room, as everyone looked at Xander.

Self-consciously, he hitched up his blanket.

"What?" he asked, his voice both questioning and defensive.

Still unable to believe that her friend was back, Willow said quietly, "Spike had a chip in his brain that stopped him from hurting humans. He was working with us."

"Oh!" Xander exclaimed, then held up one hand. "My Bad."

He turned to the dust on the floor, "Sorry."

He turned back, only to be the second recipient of a pair of hugs, from two extremely happy girls.

Dawn and Willow hugged him hard, still babbling. Xander looked over their heads at Buffy, and just winked.

After explaining to the others how he had appeared outside the school, naked, and ran all the way here, he turned to Willow.

"We are going to have a very long talk tomorrow about your magic use," Xander declared definitely, his eyes pinning Willow's firmly.

Willow went white, then nodded softly. "OK, Xan."

Looking at the clock on the wall of Giles' apartment, Xander said, "Why don't we call it a night, well, a morning anyway, go home, get some sleep and meet back here tomorrow? Then I'll explain where I've been for the past few years."

Reluctantly, the others nodded. "You're staying with us, Xan." Buffy stated decisively, before the question could arise.

Xander smiled and nodded. He turned to Giles, "I couldn't borrow some clothes could I? I don't really fancy getting across town wearing only a blanket."

"Yes, quite, of course," Giles said, moving to his bedroom. He returned minutes later. "I used to wear these when I was a young man. They, err, might suit you."

Xander looked down at the jeans and t-shirt. He smiled his thanks and went to get changed.

Dawn was asleep, the emotions of having first her sister, then Xander delivered back from the dead had overwhelmed her.

Xander and Buffy sat on the couch together, each drinking a mug of hot chocolate.

"You knew Spike had a chip," Buffy said, watching Xander.

Xander blushed a little. "Yeah, I did. But I saw him going through your underwear and then there was that whole Buffybot thing, and let me say, "Ewww!" about that. When I saw him then, I kinda decided that it was too good an opportunity to let pass."

Buffy smiled, "I can't say I'm too upset."

The smile left her face as she looked him straight in the eyes.

"Why did you do it, why did you leave there for me?"

"I told you before, there is no heaven for me without you," Xander replied truthfully.

"You could have waited there, where you had everything your imagination wanted. It wouldn't have been forever before I was back, one way or another," Buffy said softly.

"It would be empty without you," he said simply. "I couldn't let you go on your own. Sure, it's going to take some adjustment to get back into reality, to having to work for a living and everything else. But it's better than being trapped, watching you and never being able to touch you, to talk to you, to kiss you."

"Besides, I couldn't let you come back from the dead again on your own. Who knows what would have happened to you?" Xander looked at her thoughtfully. "You have no intention of telling Willow how upset you really are, do you?"

Buffy shook her head, looking down at her lap.

Xander reached over, lifting her chin gently. "I may have left you once. But I'm never going to do it again."

Buffy smiled at him, leaning closer. She gently kissed him, "I love you."

He smiled warmly against her kiss.

"I love you, I'll love you - Always."

And I will love you, baby - Always.

And I'll be there forever and a day - Always.

I'll be there till the stars don't shine,

Till the heavens burst and

The words don't rhyme.

And I know when I die, you'll be on my mind,

And I'll love you - Always.