



# Like a Cat in a Bag

## Part 1

In some ways Alexander Harris was a simple man; you could often tell his mood simply by looking at him. Today was no exception. Anyone looking at the smartly dressed young man as he wandered down the high street in a sharp suit, whistling, would instantly know that he was in a very good mood.

A couple of promotions at the construction agency where he worked were both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because the money he was now earning exceptionally good, not to mention the fringe benefits like a great dental plan, health plan and four weeks of paid holiday. A curse because it meant he spent more time in meetings than he did out on the site.

Today's meeting had been successful, the contract to rebuild Sunnydale High school was his, bonus's for early completion agreed and the rest of the day off to celebrate.

So, off Xander had whistled, making his way to Buffy's house. He knew that the Chosen One was not at work today so he figured he'd surprise her with the news. Maybe he could take her and Dawn out to dinner later.

He slid into his new car, a Toyota SUV, and drove competently, singing along to a classic rock station on the radio. The carpenter pulled to a smooth halt outside Casa De La Buff and jumped out of the car. The radio singing was instantly replaced by cheerful whistling as he let himself in through the front door.

"Buffy?" Xander called, not seeing her in the living room. He walked through into the kitchen, and thought to himself, 'Must be out shopping.' He frowned as he suddenly heard a thump coming from upstairs.

The dark haired man grabbed a knife, and crept upstairs, his whistling abandoned. He wasn't sure if the noise was Buffy or a burglar, and wasn't going to take any chances. Skills, perfect by hunting creatures with super sensitive hearing, came to the fore.

He placed his left hand on the door knob to Buffy's room. If it was Buffy in there, he should give her a shock, which was reason enough to surprise her, he grinned. If it wasn't, then he was prepared to deal with a human burglar.

He took a deep, but silent, breath, and forced open the door. In doing so, he completely destroyed his own good mood.

"Xander!" Buffy shouted, "What the hell are you doing?"

Xander's voice failed him, as he looked at her, his mind unable to comprehend what he was seeing. His mouth dropped open in shock.

"Oh my god," was all he managed to get out, slumping against the wall.

"Don't look at me," Buffy screamed, furious.

That demand was enough for Xander to regain his own mental state. He closed his eyes for a brief second, focusing internally.

"What the hell am I doing?" he asked rhetorically. "I really don't think that is important at the moment. I think what is important is that you slowly, carefully, not eliminating any details tell me exactly what you are doing, how long you have been doing it. And most importantly of all," Xander's voice raised to a shout, "put that fucking needle down."

"But Xander," the Slayer whined desperately. "I need this, just let me finish then we can talk, I promise I'll tell you everything."

Xander took a step forwards and struck the needle out of Buffy's hand, knocking over the spoon with the bubbling white substance she had been holding at the same time.

She scrambled to her feet, and then dived onto the floor after the needle. "You spilt it you bastard," Buffy cried. "You have no idea how much I need that, and how much it costs."

Xander just looked at her, his normal warm chocolate eyes were now expressionless holes in his face.

The blonde Slayer knelt before him, desperation forcing a new plan into her mind. She needed the drugs, she needed someone who could pay for them.

"We're friends, Xand," Buffy purred softly, looking up at him as innocently as she could. "Maybe we could be more. I know you've always wanted me, well, this way you can have me, anyway you want me. You've got money, a flashy new car, a high paid job, a smart suit; all the things I haven't got. Take care of me and I'll do anything you want."

Buffy breathed slowly and leant forwards, nuzzling Xander's crotch.

Xander bent over, and grasped Buffy by the elbows. He lifted her up to look into her pleading blue eyes.

"Anything?" he asked softly. "Anything I want as long as I get you your fix?" The brunet's voice matched his expression, empty and expressionless.

Buffy felt a thrill of triumph, a small endorphin rush, that held off her body's demand for the drug for a second. "Yes. Any thing, any where, any time."

Xander smiled a humourless smile. "Ok, Buffy, if that's the way you want it. I do, of course, require your payment up front."

Buffy felt a moments despair in her heart as Xander accepted her offer. Something deep inside had hoped that he wouldn't, that he would help her, not take advantage of her offer. The despair was quickly quashed by the racking sensation of her body demanding more drugs, urgently.

She slid her hands down her body, grasping the hem of her t-shirt and started to lift it up, exposing her smooth stomach.

"Wait!" Xander demanded. "We do this my way."

Buffy obediently stopped moving, hoping that if she did what he said it would be over quicker and then she could get her hit.

"Close your eyes," Xander whispered, walking to her closet.

Buffy complied, then shivered lightly as she felt Xander wrapping one of the silk scarves around her eyes, all her feelings of self loathing and fear were trapped in her mind, by the hold the drugs had on her mind.

"I need condoms."

"In the bathroom, top shelf," Buffy told, another tiny part of her heart breaking was accepted as she realised Xander was concerned about catching something from her.

A small tear escaped her eye, immediately swallowed by the scarf. She just hoped Xander would hurry and get it over with. After all, what was another friendship sacrificed on the altar of her addiction.

She felt more than heard Xander return, pushing her gently face down on to the bed, then felt his hand slide down her back, the back of her legs and lifted the skirt she was wearing up. She lifted her hips as Xander grasped the top of her panties, pulling them down slowly, revealing the swell of her backside.

She yelped as she suddenly felt a prick of pain in her backside, "Wha.." was all she got out before the powerful tranquiliser knocked her unconscious.

Xander looked down at Buffy for a few seconds then sighed, and picked up his cellular phone. He dialled his office number.

"Hey Betty, it's Xander, can you put me through to Steve?"

"Hi Xander," Betty replied. "Didn't expect to hear from you today, good work on that school contract".

"Thanks" Xander replied with a slight smile.

"I'll transfer you now."

Xander waited, a tinny version of Greensleaves kept him company in the background.

"Xander." a warm deep voice said, as the other end of the phone was picked up. "What can I do for you?"

"Well," Xander began. "You know you keep telling me to take a holiday and I keep refusing?"

"Uh huh" Steve replied noncommittally,

"I think I'm going to need to take some off it, something's come up".

"I'll tell you what," Xander's boss said. "You tell me what's happening and I'll give you a reply."

Steve could hear Xander sigh audibly.

"I've just surprised a friend in her home, she was taking heroin. I want to take her away to somewhere she can't get hold of any drugs and make her give up." His voice spoke volumes in determination.

"Damn it, Xander," Steve swore. "Why can't you be normal like everyone else I hire, they go on holiday and get drunk, and if they are lucky, get laid. I need you back to work in September, which gives you seven weeks. You owe me big for this, and I will take it out of your hide."

Xander laughed softly. "Thanks Steve, now for my next question. Can I borrow your holiday home?"

"My holiday home?" Steve yelped. "Why don't you just take my business as well, you don't want much do you."

Xander remained silent; his amused grin could be clearly heard over the line.

"Ok, pick up the keys from Betty; you'll regret this when you are back at work."

"Thanks, Steve. I really appreciate it," Xander said gratefully, and hung up.

In Xander's office, Steve walked into Betty's office. "Hey Hon, Xander's in trouble. One of his friends is hooked on drugs".

Betty look horrified, "What's he going to do?"

"What you would expect from him. He's going to try and get her off them. I let him borrow our cabin."

Betty smiled. "Good, its perfect, no one will disturb them. So he's taking his holiday now is he?"

At Steve's nod, Betty continued. "Ok, I'll arrange for it to be stocked with food, the least we can do is help him. This is so like Xander, it was one of your better moves, hiring him."

Steve just smiled and got back to work, as always, leaving the logistics to his wife.

Back at Buffy's house, Xander dialled another number.

"Wills, it's Xander, something's come up with Buffy and I need a huge favour."

"Xander?" Willow said, surprised "What's going on? Is Buffy alright? Are you alright?"

"Babbling, Wills."

"Ooo, sorry."

"Look, I'm sorry, but I really can't tell you what is going on, your going to have to trust me about this. Buffy is not in any mystical danger, she just has a few issues she needs to sort through and I am going to help her do it. I've arranged to borrow a cabin in the mountains for a few weeks and I've got the time off. I need you to look after Dawn for her while she is gone."

"What about Buffy's job?" Willow asked, her natural curiosity put to one side by the resolve in her best male friends voice.

"This is more important, I'll deal with it."

"OK, Tara and I will come over shortly."

"Thanks, Willow. I owe you one; you'll be able to contact me in emergencies on my mobile. We're going to head out now, tell Dawn that we both love her."

With that, Xander hung up and dialled enquires.

"Can you put me through to the DoubleMeat Palace, please."

Five seconds later, after the operator had put him through, the phone was answered.

"Hello, DoubleMeat Palace, Shawn speaking. You want it, we fry it. Have you tried our new triple meat platter? How may I be of service?"

Xander was impressed that the person on the other end of the phone had managed to get all of that out in one breath.

"Can I speak to the Duty Manager please," Xander requested formally. "I'm calling on behalf of Buffy Summers".

"Wait one moment, please."

Xander waited, this time to complete silence.

Seconds later, a voice growled, "She better not be calling in sick again. I've had enough of her strange hours and unreliability."

"Actually, I'm calling on Ms Summers' behalf; she regrets to inform you that she is tendering her resignation, effective immediately." Before the man on the other end could splutter anything, Xander hung up and walked downstairs.

He walked into the kitchen, and went through the drawers. He eventually found what he was looking for, Buffy's utility bills. There was a large pile, some of which were on second and third notice. He fetched his check book from the car, and sat down and filled out the paperwork, paying each of them off. He didn't even think about the damage it was doing to his personal bank account.

Finally, he left Willow a check to cover the two months, just in case. He wrote her a short note explaining what to do with the money, before walked into a closet and pulling out the shackles they had used on Oz, when he was doing his full moon nocturnal thing.

He walked back upstairs, and into Buffy's room. With quick movements, he chose several random outfits for the Chosen One, deliberately going for clothes she wouldn't mind ruining. He suspected that, even with Slayer healing, getting the drugs out of her system was not going to go well. Xander added some of his spare clothes to the bag, as he had often collapsed after patrol, it had made sense for him to move some clothes in.

He packed everything in his car, before returning to the sleeping Slayer. Any fantasies Xander entertained about sleeping beauty were ruined by the thick trail of drool running down her chin, but he picked her up and carried her gently in his arms anyway.

In any other town, the sight of a man carrying an unconscious female and placing her in the back of his car might have been cause for concern amongst the neighbours, in this town, like everything else, it was simply ignored.

He made a quick stop, to pick up the keys, before driving for several hours. Xander followed the directions Betty had given him, turning up a dirt track. He was immensely grateful for his SUV's four wheel drive capability. It turned the treacherous climb into a relatively straight forward drive.

He pulled to a stop, the gravel crunching under his wheel.

He could hear Buffy start to move in the back seat, the Slayer powers were eliminating the powerful sedative faster than he had expected.

Xander grabbed the restraints, throwing them over his shoulder, and grabbed the unconscious girl. He carried her into the cottage, straight into the bedroom, and dropped her unceremoniously onto the bed. For his own preservation, and to stop her escaping, he handcuffed her firmly to the iron chassis of the bed, and then tenderly wiped the drool from her face.

He watched her for a second, almost able to see her super powered physiology throwing off the effects of the powerful animal tranquiliser. A dose that would have knocked out a rhino for a week, was barely lasting six hours on her.

He realised that he had a few more minutes before she would wake up, so he walked back outside, to finish unloading the car.

Xander looked up, as another SUV pulled up the drive, and parked next to him. A cute woman with long brown hair disembarked, and smiled at him.

"Xander Harris?" she asked cheerfully.

"Yep."

"Oh good, I'm from Barney's Supplies. Betty phoned and asked me to stock you up with food and drink, so I've got a lot of shopping in the back for you."

"How much do I owe you?" Xander asked as they finished placing the shopping in the kitchen.

"Nothing, Betty paid for it all for you"

Xander smiled, "I owe her for big time for this."

"Yep, I'm Sandra by the way, Sandy to my friends. Betty and Steve couldn't stop talking about their new foreman the last time they were here, so it's good to meet you."

"Well, thanks for bringing this stuff out Sandy. Maybe I'll see you again sometime," Xander added with a flirtatious grin.

Sandy just grinned at him. "Maybe." She said her goodbyes and left.

With a deep breath to fix his nerves, Xander walked back into the bedroom and sat on the foot of the bed, calmly watching as Buffy struggled towards consciousness.

Buffy slowly woke up, almost absently wondering where she was. She enjoyed the feeling of waking up from a refreshing nap for a brief moment, before her addiction kicked in, and sent messages demanding more drugs to every part of her system.

She tried to curl up, to stop the cramps, but found her hands secured. She panicked, pulling on the chains hard. Half remembered images of her past fluttered through her mind, pictures of demons and vampires who had captured and tormented her.

Finally, she realized the futility of her struggling, and stopped fighting. Buffy slowly opened her eyes, fearing the worst.

What she finally saw was worse than she had imagined, it was much more terrifying. Xander was watching her, expressionlessly.

"No use fighting Buff, those chains held a ravenous wolfboy, they'll hold you as well. Besides, your not in tip top shape as it is, are you?" Xander stated, almost casually.

"Xander," Buffy croaked; her mouth dry. "What are you doing, why am I chained up?"

"Don't you remember Buffy?" Xander asked. The voice that was usually so warm was even and passionless.

"I finished work early, went to your house, and found you about to inject yourself. I stopped you, and then you offered to prostitute yourself for a fix.

"I agreed, blindfolded you, laid you on the bed then tranquilized you with that stuff we had from the KrTok Demon a few weeks ago.

"I then paid your bills, arranged for Willow and Tara to look after Dawn, took some time of work myself, quit your job for you at DoubleMeat palace, put you in my car and drove you here."

Buffy blinked a few times, taking it all in.

"You did what?" she eventually screamed. "You had no right to do any of that. Let me go, how dare you quit my job for me. I need that money to provide for me and Dawn. And what the hell do you think you are doing paying those bills, it is my responsibility, my life. You can't take that away from me. Let me loose, and then take me home."

"No" Xander replied quietly. "Would you like a drink of water?"

"What? Didn't you hear what I said," with this, Buffy started to struggle violently. "Let me go."

"Where will go when you are free?"

Buffy stopped for a second, "What do you mean?"

"You are in a log cabin in the middle of a forest. You're miles away from civilization. The keys to my car have been buried outside somewhere, so you can't drive. In the condition you are in, you can't walk very far. Even if you could, you have no money, very few clothes and no idea what State you are in. You are stuck here till I decide to let you go."

Buffy collapsed back on the bed. "I would have given you what you want back at my house Xander; you didn't have to go to all this trouble."

Xander looked down at Buffy, his expression unchanging. "I am not going to have sex with you Buffy, in your current state I don't find you in the slightest bit attractive. What I am going to do is keep you here till every part of that drug is out of your body."

"You can't do that" Buffy yelled again. "I need that to live, I need that to feel, I'll be dead without it."

"You might feel like death Buffy, but you won't die, I promise you that. You're going cold turkey. You lost the right to make decisions for yourself and for Dawn when you decided that your answers could be found in a syringe."

Buffy started to cry, soft tears designed to go straight through a man's heart. "Please Xander, let me go, I'll stop taking drugs I promise, but I need to be free."

Xander stood and walked over to her, Buffy felt a small surge of triumph. 'Always works,' she said to herself. He gently touched her cheek, wiping away the tears.

"No." he said, turned, and walked out of the room, leaving behind the screamed insults.

In the kitchen, Xander slid his jacket onto the back of a chair, and rolled up his sleeve. Thirty minutes of unpacking later, and he found that he had more than enough basic food to last the both of them for many months. He decided to start with something basic, and quickly put together a chicken soup. His parents neglect had been useful for one thing.

He had seen addiction all his life, seen how it could destroy someone from the inside out, and for Buffy's sake. For Dawn's sake, even for his own, he was not going to let her go down that route, no matter what it took.

The screaming from the bedroom had stopped, so he filled a glass with water, and took it in to the room.

Buffy watched him sullenly, as he sat next to her and lifted her head, putting the glass to her lips. She drank fast, and then turned her head away, trying to ignore him as much as possible. He laid her head down and walked back out of the room.

As quietly as she could, Buffy laid there and sobbed quietly. The torture the drug was placing on her was as painful as any a vampire had inflicted on her in the past.



## Like a Cat in a Bag Part 2

Xander walked out of the cabin, ignoring the slowly setting sun. He moved down the small woodland trail, completely oblivious to the picturesque scenery.

He stopped in a small clearing to sit and stare into the distance. He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. This was not how he had expected his afternoon to go. He should have been in a restaurant with two beautiful women; not in a log cabin in the middle of nowhere with a drug-addicted Slayer chained to a bed. He laughed a little, a sad half-laugh. He had always wanted this particular Slayer in his bed, just not like this.

Xander had been tempted by Buffy's offer. He knew, though, that sex under those conditions would be meaningless. That it would make him feel worse after the act. Faith had taught him that by kicking him out of the motel room shortly after they had had sex.

Xander punched the ground, hard. Standing, he kicked a tree, scaring a bird out of it. The bird squawked angrily at him, but he ignored it as he took out his anger and frustration on the tree, punching and kicking it repeatedly.

Breathing heavily Xander examined his knuckles; they were bright red and felt painful. At least he had more control now; the idea of walking away from Buffy, from everyone was slowly receding.

Seeing the Slayer taking drugs had rocked Xander to his core. He understood that the first priority was getting them out of her system, forcing her to clean up. The second priority was dealing with whatever had caused her to decide that drugs were the way to go.

Xander knew that Buffy's recent death and resurrection had had a profound effect on the Slayer's psyche. Since she had returned, it had been clear that she felt some resentment of him and to the others, for ripping her out of heaven. She had spent more time with Spike than she had before, because he knew more about what she was feeling. Xander felt a little guilty for being involved in getting her back; it was one of the reasons he was so willing to take control and help her. The other reason was obvious: Buffy was one of his girls and when one of his girls needed help, they could rely on Xander Harris to provide it.

Earlier in the afternoon Xander had been walking confidently; his demeanor that of a successful young man. Now he trudged dejectedly along the trail. As he walked up the steps, Xander ruthlessly shoved all of his negative thoughts and anger to the back of his mind. His back straightened and his head lifted.

Xander walked into the kitchen. Not hearing anything from the bedroom, Xander wondered if she was asleep. Feeling hunger pangs, he checked his chicken soup. He tasted it and smiled slightly, pleased with the flavor. He poured the chunky soup into a bowl and leaned leisurely back against the counter. He stared aimlessly out of the window as he ate. The hot food helped his mental state rebuild itself, fortifying him for the trial that was to come. He was under no illusions that it would be nice and pretty; he was expecting figurative hell.

Xander finished the bowl and placed it under the tap, rinsing before pouring a fresh bowl of soup. Taking one last spoonful of soup for himself and grabbing a roll of kitchen paper, Xander walked in to the bedroom. The petite blonde Slayer was asleep, lying as Xander had left her with tear tracks clearly visible on her cheeks. Walking over to her, Xander sat next to her head. The rocking of the bed waking her from her uncomfortable sleep.

"Xander," she said, her voice sounding rough.

"Food, Buffy," Xander said calmly. He put the bowl of soup down on the bedside table. He looked down at Buffy for a second, mentally running through the best way to feed her. He slid his legs on the bed, pulling the chained Chosen One's head onto his lap, sitting beside her and between the chains holding her arms up.

"Xander!" Buffy said sharply "You can't feed me, I'm not a baby, let me go, I promise I won't go anywhere."

"No." With that Xander reached for the bowl of soup and grabbed the spoon. Loading it he moved it to Buffy's mouth.

"I don't want to eat anything," Buffy said petulantly. She moved her head forwards fast, trying to knock the spoon away in a display of rebellion. Some of the warm soup fell on to Buffy's chin. Xander placed the spoon down and reached for the kitchen paper, wiping her chin clean.

"You'll feel a lot worse if you don't eat."

Xander placed another spoonful in front of Buffy, who opened her mouth this time. Xander moved the spoon in and Buffy sucked the soup down. The small taste of well cooked soup suddenly awoke a ravenous hunger in Buffy's body. Her super strength and agility as a Slayer meant that she often had to consume vast amounts of calories and Buffy had not eaten since breakfast. Not wanting to appear as if she was enjoying the food, she waited for him to continue to feed her, which he did.

Xander started a rhythm of spoon, bowl, soup, mouth, repeating as quickly as Buffy could eat. As Buffy ate, she was thinking of ways that she could regain some sort of control over this situation. Since she had become the Slayer at fifteen, she had had an almost pathological need to control both her surroundings and herself.

Buffy demanded almost total obedience from her friends and colleagues, although she was clever enough to disguise it

Realizing that she was in a position where Xander held most of the cards, Buffy decided the only way for her to regain control was to use her body. Her natural arrogance meant that the idea of Xander rejecting her again never formed in her mind.



Buffy had experienced relationships with ever liked. Angel, a centuries old vampire, had fallen head over heels in love with her. He had been mysterious and dangerous when they met, appearing out of the night to save the day. Over the course of their relationship, she had changed him, molded him to fit her ideal. When he tried to resist and reassert himself, they had argued to the point of violence, before eventually splitting up.

When that relationship had ended, Buffy had slept with Parker. Although it turned out to be a one night stand, she had been an enthusiastic participant. When she had realized that Parker had no intention of having a long term relationship with her, Buffy had lashed out at him, knocking him flat.

After that came Buffy's attempt at normalcy, a relationship with Riley. Again it had ended with disaster, although Buffy could not see the parallel with Riley's flirtation with vampires to her own. She had followed a calculated plan to fruition; turning Riley from an independent commander of an elite demon fighting squad to her lapdog, with nothing more than a smile, a few words and some awesome performances in the sack. It was just a pity Riley couldn't keep up, but that wasn't important.

After her return from Heaven, Buffy had allowed herself to be seduced by another master vampire: Spike, Angel's Childe. The only difference between Spike and Parker was that when she had hit Spike, he had hit her back as hard. He was not daunted by her super strength or her sharp personality; he was a challenge to her.

Yet during all this Xander had been there. Her safety blanket. So obviously in love with her. All it had taken was the occasional smile, a tender look and the occasional glimpse of hidden flesh.

As Buffy had now eaten her fill, she spat a mouthful of soup out and onto her chest, covering Xander's hand at the same time. She hoped Xander would not just leave her with the congealing soup on her chest and would remove her top to clean it. She was certain that seeing her topless would break down his reserves.

Xander looked down at his hand and cleaned it with another of the paper towels. He then looked down at Buffy's chest; the soup had left a large stain. He moved her head, sliding his legs out and stood up. He picked up the almost finished bowl of soup and the used towels and walked into the kitchen silently. Grabbing a large sharp knife, he returned to Buffy.

"Hey, wait a minute." Buffy said nervously, watching him approach her. Xander grabbed her shirt, lifted it clear of her body and carefully cut it off her torso. Buffy tried hard not to squirm,

"That shirt cost money, you bastard."

"Then you shouldn't have spat soup on it."

As he finished cutting Buffy smiled internally, looking forward to seeing how Xander dealt with her naked body. She wasn't wearing a bra.

Removing the tattered remains of her clothing, Xander looked down at her chest for a second. Buffy unconsciously flexed her muscles a little, forcing her chest up to him. Without a change in his expression, Xander tucked a small blanket over her chest and carried the rags out.

Buffy almost exploded with rage: "How dare you ignore me, you know you've wanted me since we met - " her voice changed to a mocking tone.

"Can I have you? They were your first words to me. Now I'm here, helpless and half naked. Come and touch me. Use me, god damn it. Or was all that talk from Anya just that, talk? Don't you walk away from me; I'm what you always dreamed off."

Xander turned slowly and faced her, his patience snapped. The stress of the day caught up with him as he whispered, "At the moment Buffy, I would rather sleep with Drusilla." With that, Xander walked out as Buffy burst into tears again.

Xander lent against the now closed bedroom door and slumped down. Images of a half naked Buffy under his power played havoc with his mind. He wanted to go back in there, to take what Buffy had offered, to bury himself in the golden Slayer. He wanted to kiss the areas he had exposed, explore them with his mouth and tongue. What she had said was true, all of it.

But Xander had grown to like himself; he had gained self respect. There was a time when he had given in to lust, kissing Willow in the Fluke incident. The painful break up with Cordelia that had followed, combined with the loss of Willow's close friendship, had taught him a lesson he would not forget.

Through everything Xander had experienced in his young life he had found an inner peace, built on the knowledge that he had made worthwhile contributions to society. They might not be public knowledge, but Xander had a great job that he was very good at, an apartment in a nice block, friends that he could rely on and the knowledge that he had personally saved the world on more than one occasion. Xander knew in his heart that he deserved a relationship with an equal, someone who could trust and love herself.

At the moment Buffy, regardless of her physical attractiveness, was not that person. Xander was not going to enter into any form of relationship purely for physical attraction. He had tried that one with Anya and while they had almost fallen in love; his endless devotion to Buffy had caused him to make some decisions that had made the relationship self destruct. So now Xander was here fighting his primal urges with pictures of the beautiful (and topless) Slayer stuck in his mind.

Xander yawned and went to have a shower. He soaped himself automatically and washed his hair. Drying himself, he pulled a pair of soft training pants out of his bag and put them on. Barefoot and topless himself, Xander half carried, half dragged the couch from the living room into the bedroom with Buffy. Buffy raised her head and watched him, trying to ignore the fact that working construction had left him with a body to be envied and admired. Placing the couch near the bed, Xander left again silently. He returned carrying a bowl of warm water and a cloth. Xander pulled the blanket off Buffy, and then knelt by her shackled feet. As Buffy lay there motionless, he removed her socks. Moving up, he undid the buttons on her

skirt and unwrapped it from around her, leaving her in just her plain white panties. For a second both Xander and Buffy imagined this situation, him taking care of her when she was ill, only without the drugs; thinking of where this act could lead.

Keeping his face carefully expressionless, Xander gave Buffy a full bed bath, wiping her skin with the warm damp cloth. Buffy watched him from under her lashes; she was cried out for now, she had no tears left. She wondered what he was feeling, wondered if he hated her, hating that he had to do this, hating everything to do with this situation. For some reason the thought of Xander hating her caused her to suddenly feel sick.

Xander carefully washed her chest. He concentrated on making sure that he treated her breasts like every other part of her, not showing any attraction or desire. As Buffy felt Xander rub the cloth over her sensitive breasts with no more emotion than a chiropractor examining a patient, Buffy started to realize that using her body was simply not going to work. With that option fading fast, Buffy was confused. She simply had no idea what to do next to try and regain control. Xander finished washing her and placed the cloth in the now cold water. He wrapped the blanket back around Buffy and tenderly pushed her hair back.

"Sleep Buffy," he said softly, "Tomorrow is going to be bad."

Trying to ignore the softness and warmth of his touch, Buffy paid no heed to his words and rested her head back, "I can't sleep like this," she said firmly.

For a second Xander's face showed some emotion: humor. "Learn," was all he said.

Xander lent down on the couch and prepared himself for an uncomfortable night's sleep.

It was a clicking sound that eventually woke him. Like a tap dripping, the sound impinged on his unconscious mind, forcing him out of his sleep. Opening his eyes slowly, he glanced at his watch. 3:47, the digital display taunted him. He looked around for the source of the tapping. The bed was moving against the wall. Looking further up, he sat up straight, fast. Buffy looked very flushed, the blanket was drenched with sweat. She tossed and turned uncomfortably with her arms and legs still tied, whimpering almost silently. Suddenly she groaned, and tried to curl up but was stopped by the chains.

Xander recognized the signs of withdrawal for what they were and made a quick decision. He undid the heavy cuffs around her arms and feet. Half waking, Buffy groaned in relief as her muscles contracted for the first time in hours. Buffy curled into a fetal position, shivering more violently now, clutching her stomach as she woke fully.

"What's happening to me, Xander?" she asked softly, a terrified look in her eyes.

"You're going through the stages of eliminating the heroin from your body."

"It feels like I'm dying. Please Xander, you have to help me."

"You know I will, Buffy."

"Then get me a hit; it will make all of this go away. I'll be better again, not being tortured to death."

"I can't do that Buffy, and I won't do that. I'm going to help you by making sure you get over this as soon as possible."

"But it hurts so much." Buffy's teeth started to chatter as she suddenly felt incredibly cold; her skin was cooling down, the sweat now working against her.

Xander reached down and pulled Buffy up. He wrapped a fresh blanket around her and sat down on the couch. He cuddled her to his chest like a child, wrapping his arms around her and resting her head on his shoulder.

"Shhh, try and sleep now," he whispered tenderly.

Buffy shook a little in his arms, but felt a near peace for the first time in many months. She closed her eyes, feeling safe and warm. As she fell into a restless sleep, she was comforted by Xander's smell.

Buffy woke in pain again; the cramps shooting through her were incapacitating. Xander was no longer with her, although she was still free on the couch. For a second, she thought about escaping, getting to civilization, finding some drugs, but then another cramp hit her. Buffy decided it would be a lot better to just lay here and die. At least that will make him feel guilty, she thought to herself. Wrapping herself more firmly in the blanket, her knees on her chest, Buffy prepared herself for the end.

In the kitchen, Xander made himself some breakfast, just some Captain Crunch cereal. He moved outside to the porch and relaxed - his thoughts on the day. He knew Buffy was going to be incredibly lucky. Her Slayer physiology was going to take her through all the symptoms of withdrawal much quicker than a normal addict. It might hurt more, but it would only last for a few days, if that. Her body was going to purge the drug out of her system. It interfered with her primary duty, slaying vampires. Thinking of vampires for the first time, Xander walked over to his car and got his phone. He was relieved that there was a faint signal and called Willow.

"Hey Wills"

"What time is it?"

"Early."

"Call back later, sleepy now."

Xander laughed, "Just wanted to check everything was OK."

He heard Willow groan, "Everything is fine. We patrolled last night. Spike helped, although he was acting weird."

"Weird in what way?"

"He kept asking where you and Buffy were, he didn't accept that we didn't know. I heard him mutter that she would need him soon." Xander could hear the grin in Willow's voice, "We told him that the Slayer would never need him and he stormed off in a huff."

"Thanks Will, I'll talk to you later. Every thing's going well here, hopefully it will only be for another few days."

"Take your time, Xand, we're having a blast here. We stayed up after patrol watching movies and eating frozen pizza. Dawn fell asleep about three a.m. on the couch, she's still there now."

"Love ya, Will."

"Love ya back, Xandman."

Xander smiled and hung up, then frowned. A thought suddenly occurred to him. Behavior for the past few months was examined, scenes put together in context, and strange meetings were explained. Xander froze as the answer came to him. With a voice dripping with hate, Xander said one word. "Spike."

Returning to the kitchen, Xander started to cook some porridge. He wasn't sure but he didn't think that Buffy would be able to handle solid food for the next few days.

After the porridge was cooked, Xander left it to cool and returned to the bedroom. He found Buffy curled up, rocking slightly. He picked her up and gently put her onto the bed.

"Feel like talking?" he asked quietly.

Buffy opened her eyes and stared at him. She groaned softly "Sure, let's talk about the hell you're putting me through, let's talk about the fact that I want to die and go back to heaven, let's talk about how my life here is a living hell and drugs are the only thing that gets me moving. Let's talk about that, shall we?"

"If you want," Xander said amicably. "Start by talking about how your life is a living hell, then talk about why you want to go back to heaven, and then finish on how you started taking drugs."

"Wait a second," Buffy frowned, "That's not what I said."

"It's your choice, Buff. Either that or we go back to uncomfortable silence."

"It didn't seem uncomfortable for you."

Xander merely shrugged and returned to the kitchen. He ladled a few large spoonfuls of porridge into a bowl, added a sprinkling of sugar and returned to Buffy. He held the bowl out to her and she tried to take it. Tremors wracked through her body, making her hands shake as she tried desperately to control herself, to take the offered food. With a few tears of frustration, she gave up and slumped back onto the bed dejectedly.

Again, Xander moved behind and slowly spoon-fed her. Buffy ate, trying hard not to think about the humiliation that being fed like a baby was causing her.

Xander finished feeding her, sat back on the couch, and placed his feet on the bed. He relaxed as much as possible, projecting an outward appearance of total calm and control. It was a front to cover the internal dread and despair he was feeling; he felt literally sick to his stomach as he thought about how this conversation was going to happen. Looking at Buffy, he said, "Talk."

Buffy thought for a second, contemplating ignoring Xander. Eventually she decided to talk, to get everything off her chest, maybe if he knew everything she had been through he would let her go and she could end this suffering. For a second, the mental image of taking the drug horrified her, but her addiction quickly changed that to desire.

She started speaking softly, barely audible. For almost the first time since she had become the Slayer, she talked directly from her heart, her soul; without conscious thought and without filtering it through her mind. "You have no idea what heaven is like, you can't describe it. It's not words, but concepts. Peace, Hope, Love, all of that and more. Then I felt my whole soul being wrenched, grabbed, pulled away, and when the pain stopped, I was in a coffin. I had to claw my way out of my own grave."

"My own grave, Xander. One minute I was in heaven, the next I was in a grave. How was I supposed to feel?"

Buffy took a deep breath, suddenly hot. She slipped the blanket down her chest until it barely covered her as she talked. It took all of Xander's will power not to stare at her exposed flesh.

"Then I didn't know what to do. You were all so happy to see me, so pleased I was back, that I couldn't bring you down. I couldn't feel anything, Xander; you had bought my body back to life but left my soul. I fought, I worked and I slept, I tried to be cheerful with you guys. Then one night, I was out with Spike and I said something to him, he turned around and hit me. It hurt, but I felt something, I wasn't dead. I talked to Spike about it and he was wonderful, he knows what it's like to be dead and he helped me. At first it was through pain; after not feeling anything for so long, it was so

pleasurable to feel pain.

"Then one night he offered me a cigarette, he said it was a special one. It was cannabis. I smoked it and felt warm throughout my body, like my soul was returned to me, but then it wore off. I tried it again, but it wasn't the same, so I asked Spike for something stronger. He looked at me and said that this stuff wasn't free. I asked him how I could pay; I was barely earning enough for food, never mind anything else. He just grinned and kissed me. He pushed me against a wall and ran his hands over my body roughly. "

Buffy was lost now, she wasn't paying any attention to Xander; thoughts of making him pay were gone. For the first time Buffy unloaded everything that had happened to her to someone who cared.

"It made me feel dirty, it made me feel horrible, it made me guilty, but I enjoyed it, Xander. I felt repulsive when it was finished, when I walked home, sore, from that dark alleyway. But I felt. God, I felt something. It gave me enough to get through the day. The next night, Spike turned up and offered me the needle. I refused, but he said if I didn't, he would tell everyone that I had slept with him and that he would then vanish, go to Africa or something and leave me alone, with all of you gone and no one who could make me feel anything.

"I took it. I was worried about the scars, but my Slayer healing took care of that. It was so good; I felt free, I felt normal, even sleeping with Spike afterwards was good. And so it went on. I took drugs, I slept with Spike and when I wasn't doing either, I felt dead. I think I hated you guys for bringing me back, but at least I could feel occasionally."

Buffy finally looked up at Xander, waiting for his reaction.

Xander's mask dropped as he looked directly at her. She could see the burning passion in his eyes, the rage in his soul. His whole body was trembling. His hands desperately clawed at the couch cushions, trying to keep control.

He didn't say anything immediately. He fought an internal battle with his feelings; hate and love swirled around his mind, each vying for supremacy. He looked Buffy directly in the eye, then spoke fast.

"What sort of person do you think I am, Buffy? A nice person or an awful person; a liar and a cheat?" He didn't wait for a reply before continuing, "The best moment of my life was the first time I saw you, but the worst time was when I watched you die; when you were laying there, broken and lifeless.

"You have been the center of my life since I was fifteen. I have stood by you through master vampires and demon mayors. I have saved your life more times than you will ever know. And suddenly you were dead. I took care of Dawn; I survived with the center of my universe ripped out of my chest."

Xander took a deep breath, still fighting for control. "Life went on for us, but we thought you were in a demon dimension. That you were being tortured. I could not live with that thought; none of your family could live with that thought. We had to do something. And you know what Buff? We assumed that if by some chance we were wrong, that you were in heaven, and then our spell would fail. Satan himself can't touch anyone who has been accepted in to heaven so what chance would we have had against the Almighty?"

As Xander spoke, his self-control started to slip. "When you came back and told us that you had been in heaven, I thought that you had been sent back for a reason, that heaven wasn't your destiny; it was a temporary reward. A place for you to recharge.

"I can understand you backing away from me, from us, and feeling resentful. In a weird and twisted way, I can even understand you spending more time with Spike. But Buffy," Xander's chest was heaving with restrained passion as his expressive eyes flashed brightly, "instead of allowing people who truly love and care for you to help you, people who have sacrificed for you in the past you turned to a soulless demon. You allowed him to touch you, to get you on drugs. You choose to allow yourself to become addicted to both him and the filth he was peddling. You choose a coward's way out; you choose to kill yourself slowly."

Xander's eyes burned into Buffy's, "I don't know who you are anymore, Buffy. I don't know if we are friends now or if we will be friends in the future."

Xander climbed out of the chair and walked out of the room, leaving a shell-shocked Buffy behind as she tried to grasp what he had said to her. She didn't even notice the sound of the front door slamming as Xander left.

Xander collapsed by his car, sobbing, and curling up as he tried to deal with his sadness and rage. Only one thought echoed through his mind. 'Spike Must Die.'

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## Like a Cat in a Bag Part 3

It took a few minutes for Xander to regain control; he felt strangely empty after breaking down in tears so completely. Wiping his eyes on his shirt sleeve, Xander stood, using the front wheel of his car for support, and took a deep breath. Exhaling slowly, he tried to examine his feelings. The primary one was relief. Relief that they had started talking, started to clear the air.

Xander reached into his pocket and pulled out his keys. Climbing into his SUV, he started the engine and drove off. He reached out and turned the radio on; the sounds of 98 WAVE filled his car. Relaxing a little, he drove towards the nearest town.

Buffy winced when she heard the car start and the sound of the gravel grating as it pulled away. His final words to her were indelibly etched in her mind.

'What is friendship supposed to be?' she asked herself. Buffy looked back over the past few years, over her relationships and friendships. She frowned as she realized her answer: She didn't know.

Buffy felt anxious. She was scared that Xander had left her permanently. She hoped that he hadn't; her earlier certainty over his actions was badly shaken. She froze, her mind going back over her last thoughts. She was feeling anxious! Last night she had felt calm and safe. She was feeling emotions, negative emotions but emotions none the less.

Buffy's thoughts were suddenly derailed as her protesting stomach warned her that she was about to lose her breakfast. She tried to stand and run to the bathroom. To her dismay, she couldn't; she was too weak. All she could do was turn her head and lay on her side as she was violently sick, covering one side of the bed. Lacking the strength to move, Buffy curled up and slept, her earlier epiphany forgotten.

Xander pulled into a car parking space outside the nearest public library. He walked in and was greeted by the librarian.

He paid for access to a computer, and using the lessons Willow had forced upon him, searched the web for information on heroin addiction.

Xander worked for 30 minutes, printing pages as he found useful tips. Standing, he stretched, and walked back to the counter and paid for his print outs. Climbing back in his car, Xander drove down the street, back towards the cabin.

Xander started to think about the conversation he had had with Buffy that morning. The radio started to play pop music and rather than find a different channel, he turned it off. Some of the revelations were unexpected. He had already guessed a lot of what she had done, but it had still hurt to realize how far Buffy had fallen.

Xander pulled his car over and stopped by the side of the road, not yet ready to face Buffy. The talk of addiction had forced him an uncomfortable truth: he was addicted to Buffy. Over the years he had exceeded the demands of loyalty and friendship with his behavior. He had stayed by her side even when she ignored him, or took him for granted, sustaining himself on an occasional glance from her. His addiction had been a small factor in the undoing of his personal relationships.

Xander contemplated his own medicine; going cold turkey and cutting Buffy out of his life completely. Thanks to his successful career in construction, he had opportunities to work all over the country.

After everything he had been through in his life, he knew himself pretty well. While he was often quick to anger, he was as quick to forgive in most cases. He knew he held grudges, often far longer than was warranted, but he felt that that was balanced by his loyalty to others. His loyalty wasn't boundless though; it had a breaking point. As far as he was concerned, she was on her last chance. One more instance of Buffy mistreating him and he would walk away. He still had feelings for Buffy: friendship, love and loyalty. If she pushed him too far it would be the end of any relationship they could have, except maybe that of an acquaintance. He would rather have Buffy as a friend with no hope of romance than that unpleasant alternative.

It wasn't that simple, though, because she was not the only person involved. Willow, Tara and Dawn, they were as important to him as breathing and he knew he could not cut them out of his life. This meant that even if they were no longer friends, he would not be able to ignore her. Which left him with a single option: to get over his addiction, he would have to stop looking at Buffy for approval, for a smile or for acceptance. He would have to treat her the same as everyone else; remove her from the pedestal that he had placed her on all those years ago.

This thought led Xander to the one thing he had tried to avoid thinking about: the state of his and Buffy's friendship. He contemplated forgiving her for taking drugs and fucking Spike. She was going to need all the help that he could provide to beat the heroin that was in her body. After some thought he decided not to; he would give her his support to overcome this addiction, but he would not allow her to continue treating him like she had.

He didn't totally blame Buffy for what had happened. She had made bad decisions and allowed herself to be led astray. Spike had manipulated her, using drugs to rape her spirit and soul. Spike: a vampire with a chip in his brain to match the chip on his shoulder. Spike was evil and, unlike Angel, didn't have a soul. As far as Xander was concerned, that made the vampire fair game. He had believed from the start that Spike should have been intimately introduced to an ashtray, but the others had prevailed. They argued that he could be useful in fighting the latest big bad and thanks to his chip, he couldn't hurt humans. Spike had now proved that he could hurt a human, and had done so. In the most disgusting and degrading manner possible he had turned a once proud Slayer into nothing more than a crack whore and did it behind the back of the people who allowed him to live.

He decided that the first thing he would do when he got back to Sunnydale was kill Spike. He grinned, a tinge of darkness shining through his eyes. Spike would pay for what he had done. Death would not come quickly for the vampire. In the vampire's slow death, Xander would claim

vengeance for each life the vampire had destroyed, each victim he had killed to sate his blood lust and each family ruined by his love of torture.

Xander drove back to the cabin, a little happier that he had made a few decisions. He pulled into the gravel in front of the cabin, grabbing the printouts and his book bag before entering through the door. He placed the items down on the kitchen counter and went to check on Buffy.

The first thing that hit him was the smell of stale vomit. He ran over to Buffy and placed his hand on her shoulder. Her skin was cold and clammy with visible goosebumps. He rolled her gently on to her back, and then picked her up out of the bed. She was totally limp in his arms, her head lolling back; only her breathing showed she was still alive. He moved her to the bathroom and carefully placed her on the floor. He turned both the hot and cold taps, filling the bath with warm water.

Xander turned to Buffy, she was laying as he had left her. Trails of drool and vomit were visible down her chin. She was still naked, apart from her plain white panties. He took a deep breath and slid the panties down her legs, leaving her completely naked. He picked her up carefully and lowered her into the bath.

He cursed under his breath as his shirt sleeves were drenched; he really should have rolled up his sleeves before hand. He took off his shirt, and then gently washed Buffy's face clean.

Buffy slowly forced her way back to consciousness. She could feel Xander gently cleaning her face with something a little rough. She tried to remain still; not give him any sign that she was now awake. She realized that she was in the bath; the water was gently warming her. She slowly opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Why are you doing this?"

"You have no one else."

Buffy winced slightly. "That doesn't mean that you have to do this."

Xander folded his arms on the bath, leaning against it from the floor. "I just can't accept you taking drugs." He looked Buffy straight in her eyes, "I have accepted a lot of your self destructive behavior over the years. I believe that everyone has the right to follow their own path. I've followed mine. Willow is following hers with Tara. Giles is following his. In a strange way, I could have accepted you sleeping with Spike. After all, you have a history with the un-dead."

"Bastard" Buffy spat.

"You're lying naked in a bath tub, your skin has goosebumps and is clammy; it feels like the skin of a plucked turkey. Which, incidentally, I learned today is where the phrase cold turkey comes from. This morning you admitted to sleeping with Spike, which, after Angel, is your second vampire."

Buffy flinched slightly as Xander's hard words hit her. "I didn't sleep with Spike, I allowed him to fuck me. There's a big difference. It was the only way I could get the drugs."

"Prostitution." Xander said calmly.

Buffy thrashed in the water. Raising one of her arms, she swung it violently at Xander, trying to punch him as hard as she could.

Xander watched the fist coming and accepted the punch. It barely rocked him back.

"You son of a bitch, why are you doing this to me?"

"What's the matter Buffy? Mad? Upset?"

"Yes." Buffy said, fresh tears starting to roll down her face.

"How did you feel last night, when you were sleeping on me?" Xander asked, his voice suddenly changing pitch; becoming warm and caring.

Unable to process the change in Xander's voice, Buffy just replied honestly. "Safe."

Xander smiled one of his trademark goofy grins. "So you've felt safe, angry and upset. All emotions and all without any artificially induced euphoria."

"I have to clean the bed," Xander explained, walking out, leaving a chastised Slayer alone.

Xander stripped the sheets from the bed, ignoring the smell as much as he could. He bundled them up and carried them to the kitchen, dumping them in the sink to be washed later.

He moved back to the bedroom and turned the mattress over. He pulled another set of sheets from the wardrobe and made the bed. Returning to the kitchen, he grabbed some air freshener and sprayed it liberally in the bedroom.

Xander walked back into the bathroom. He knew the water was not very hot and didn't want Buffy to catch a chill. Still topless, Xander knelt by the bath.

"Ready to get out?" he asked quietly.

Buffy nodded and lent forward, trying to stand unassisted. Xander watched her, not moving, allowing her a small show of independence. His

knowledge of psychology was pretty slim, but he was sure that someone with Buffy's normal enhanced control over her own body must hate what

was happening to her. He hoped that allowing her some triumphs would give her the strength to continue with her enforced detoxification.

Buffy tried to step out of the bath, but lost her balance. Catching her before she could fall, Xander lifted her out of the bath and sat her on the toilet. He grabbed a large towel and started to dry her, rubbing the slightly coarse material against her skin. She felt her skin tingle as she sat there allowing him complete access to her. He looked up at her, draping the towel over her legs.

"What have you done, Buffy?" he asked, a deep sadness in his voice.

"I don't know what you mean."

Xander raised his hands; for a second Buffy hoped that he was going for her breasts. Before she could digest that thought properly, Xander's hands settled just above her hips.

"I can count your ribs. Buffy."

"What?"

"A few years ago Buff, we all went down to the beach. It was mid summer, the sun was so hot. Willow was wearing a large sun hat 'cause she didn't want to get freckles. You were wearing shorts and a t-shirt. I was wearing a pair of my famous shorts. We were playing with a ball, running around the beach just the three of us. You got hot half way through," Xander voice was incredibly tender as he reminisced; he was reacting to the memory of the feelings he had encountered that day. "And you pulled your t-shirt off. I tripped over my own feet and landed in the sand, unable to stop looking at you. I've replayed that moment in my mind so many times. You were the nearest thing I have ever seen to perfection. You glowed as brightly as the sun. I felt like worshiping you."

Xander gently ran his fingers over the sides of Buffy's chest. "Now you're so thin; I don't think you've had a decent meal since you returned."

"Why are you doing this, Xander?" Buffy asked in a tiny voice. "Why are you taking care of me, why don't you let me die? Why do you still care?"

Xander ran his eyes over the naked Slayer. She was huddled over, arms across her stomach. Her hair was damp and hanging straight. She was wearing no makeup and her cheeks were pale. While her physical appearance was slightly shocking; it was her eyes that effected Xander the most. They were dull and lifeless, jaded; the eyes of a person who had seen too much, done too much, and lost her self-confidence.

"I don't know anymore, Buffy," Xander said honestly "At one time, the thought of you naked was enough to make me freeze on the spot for hours. Now you're in front of me with a towel draped over your lap. I was in love with you, deeply. I think I still am in a way, but I've changed as well. I've had to remove you from my pedestal.

"I guess that my main reason is loyalty. To you. To Dawn. To Willow. I can't wipe out the influence you've had on my life, and I don't want to. I want my friend back. I want happy, laughing Buffy back. I want healthy, fun Buffy back. I can hardly bear to see you like this. I'm going to finish getting you off these drugs. I'm going to make sure that you always have food in the house; that your bills are paid. I'm going to send you back to school; there are student loans available from different foundations that will help us pay for it.

"But this is it, Buffy." Xander's light tone vanished; turning into ice. "This is a two way deal; I do all of this and you stay clean and away from Spike. If I find you are either taking drugs again or fucking Spike," Xander paused, looking the shocked Slayer straight in her eyes. "If you do," he repeated, making sure he had her complete undivided attention, "I will be gone and I will take Dawn with me."

Buffy's eyes went wide; her mouth moved but no sounds came out. "This is your last chance, Buffy; it's up to you to take it. I'm not going to force you. I'm just letting you know what the consequences of your actions will be. If you choose right, I'll be there for you, I promise."

Buffy was silent for a second, a second that grew into a minute.

Everything Xander had said to her swirled around her head. Suddenly, something became clear.

Her mind went over all that had happened in the last two days, admitting to herself that while she had felt like she was dying; she had 'felt' something without injecting herself.

Last night she had felt safe in Xander's arms. Now she had a choice, a simple choice. The first was to continue as she was; it was guaranteed that she would feel something. She'd get the high from the drugs and the despair and darkness from fucking Spike. The downside would be that she would lose her friends, lose her sister, and probably end up dead in an alley. 'At least I'd be back in heaven' she thought to herself, trying hard to ignore the little voice that questioned whether or not she would be accepted if she ended up like that.

The second way was harder; it had no guarantee that she would continue to feel like she had been recently. It meant accepting her friends and forgiving them for bringing her back. It was her chance for redemption, for forgiveness, and to leave the darkness. Buffy sometimes had problems with making decisions her heart relied on, but not this time; she decided to try for the light, to fight for what she wanted.

She took a deep breath and tried to say something. All that came out was exhaled air, so she tried again. This time she managed to speak the four words that would change her life forever.

"I want to live."

Xander leaned towards Buffy and pulled her into a hug. She raised her arms around him and held him as well, burying her face into his shoulder. They stayed like that for several minutes.



It was only when Buffy started to shiver that Xander stood and picked her up. Buffy lent her head against Xander's chest, ('strong chest' she admitted to herself). The feeling of warmth and safety engulfed her, and for a second, she did not want to leave.

Xander placed her down on the bed again and wrapped a fresh blanket over her.

"Feel like sleeping?" Xander asked gently, his attitude changing slightly with Buffy's promise of change.

Buffy nodded, she was tired again, despite having slept most of the morning. Buffy's unique physiology was fighting the drugs in her system harder than a normal human's would. While the symptoms in the waking hours were bad, her body kept her asleep as much as possible so it could devote its entire attention to cleaning up her system.

"Will you hold me?" Buffy asked softly, looking at Xander with huge eyes.

"Do you promise not to be sick on me?" Xander said with a lopsided grin.

"No." Buffy replied, almost matching his smile.

Xander climbed into bed next to her. Buffy rolled over and draped herself over him, using his shoulder as a pillow. She sighed contentedly and immediately fell asleep. Xander looked amused,

suppressing his laughter to avoid waking the sleeping Chosen One. Settling down, Xander closed his eyes and tried to sleep himself, absently stroking his hand up and down Buffy's smooth back.

Xander woke with a start; Buffy was nowhere to be seen. He stood and walked to the bathroom, expecting to see her there. She wasn't. Sniffing the air, Xander mumbled to himself 'Bacon' and followed the smell. What he found was a barefoot slayer, wearing one of his shirts and carefully trying to cook some bacon.

"Hungry?" Xander asked.

Buffy smiled a little crookedly, "Not really, but I wanted to do something for you." At Xander's inquiring look, Buffy continued, "I'm feeling a little better, the cramps have receded and I'm not breaking out in hot and cold flushes every 30 seconds. I just feel like I'm on a really heavy period." Buffy laughed at the scared look she flashed across Xander's face.

"You can handle me being sick everywhere, shaking, and curling up in agony? But when I mention p-."

"Don't say the P word" Xander interrupted, shuddering. "I'll accept that you're feeling better."

"Ok, Xan," Buffy smirked, "I promise I won't say period again." She laughed at his reaction; for a second it would have been easy for her to forget why they were there, forget what she had done. For a brief moment in time, Buffy was a normal girl and Xander was his usual goofball self. The difference now was that Buffy knew that under his joking persona was an adult. An adult capable of making hard decisions. An adult, who, she admitted to herself, had taken complete control over her life. Two days ago, Buffy would have been furious at the thought of someone taking away her independence; she would have sworn to the moon that she was more than capable of looking after herself. Events had shown her that there was another way, a way where she could improve as a person and fulfill her personal ambitions.

He had offered her everything she could have dreamed of and did it out of love and friendship. She had woken up this morning instinctively knowing that the worst was over already. Saying a prayer of thanks for her Slayer healing, she had carefully unwrapped herself from Xander and moved to the kitchen, wanting to try and cook him something as a thank you. It had given her time to think; the length that Xander was willing to go to for her was scary. He was willing to put himself through mental and financial hell at a moment's notice, just for her.

Buffy was not used to thinking for herself like this. The closest she normally came to introspection was 'Does my butt look big in this?', yet the time spent here, in this cabin, was forcing her to examine her personality, examine herself as closely as she could. She had just arrived at the realization that she didn't like herself. She had asked herself the question, 'Would I do the same if Xander was addicted?' When she couldn't honestly answer either way, Buffy had decided that it was time to change, to become New Improved Buffy. She had missed Xander growing up; she was worried about what she was missing with Dawn.

"Sit," she commanded with a smile.

"Ma'am." Xander grinned, snapping out a salute. He sat.

"You cleaned the sheets?" he asked, seeing them hanging outside.

"Yeah, seemed only fair."

Buffy moved over, placing a plate in front of him, dropping some bacon and some eggs on to it. She poured herself a glass of orange juice and sat in front of him, smiling to herself at the domesticity of the scene.

"What did you tell Willow?"

"Just that something had come up, that she had to trust me and that we would be gone for some time."

"Are you going to tell them about this?"

"I'm not. You are."

"What?"

"You need to explain what's been happening. It's the only way you are going to be able to explain why I am moving in with you, why you have left your job and why you are going back to college."

"I don't know if I can do it."

"You can, you have to. It will help your relationship with Dawn, Willow and Tara. They are going to worry about why Spike is no longer welcome in your house; at least this way, they can understand."

"Will you be there?"

"No, this is something that you have to do on your own. This is your first big responsibility to yourself. Not to hide behind me or anyone else. You'll be able to stand on your own two feet, Buff."

Buffy nodded slowly, accepting what Xander had said.

"I know it's going to be hard, but the rewards are worth it. You'll have your life back, your self-respect back, and your confidence back. You'll be able to date again, to go out and have fun, maybe find someone you can fall in love with."

Buffy nodded again, her hair falling across her face. 'What if I have found someone to fall in love with? And what if he won't believe me?' she asked herself silently.



## Like a Cat in a Bag Part 4

Xander finished the bacon Buffy had cooked. He was amazed that anyone could make bacon taste so bad. Burnt on the outside, slightly raw in the middle, the bacon had been well and truly Slayed. He smiled at Buffy as she looked at him hopefully.

"Good," he lied cheerfully. "Do you feel up to going for a walk?"

Buffy thought for a second. "Sure, just let me get dressed."

Buffy walked back into the bedroom, pulling her hair into a loose ponytail. She opened the suitcase and looked at the clothes Xander had bought for her. She picked a jeans and shirt combination and moved over to the bed to get dressed. As she did so she caught sight of herself in the mirror and shuddered lightly.

"Actually Xan, I'm going to take a quick shower first," she shouted from the bedroom.

"k," Xander hollered back.

Buffy walked into the bathroom, frowning at the lack of stamina she had these days. Everything she did seemed to emphasize how much taking drugs had physically affected her. As she washed herself in the shower, running her hands over herself, she could feel the changes Xander had pointed out to her. Even if it hadn't been for the drugs, she could see why he would turn her down if she approached him; She did not feel attractive, let alone beautiful; she vowed to get herself back in to shape as soon as possible, both for herself, and maybe for Xander.

She turned the shower off and carefully stepped out. She dressed and blow-dried her hair. She walked out of the bedroom and found Xander draped carelessly over a chair, reading.

"What'cha reading?"

"Book," came Xander's teasing reply.

"What book?"

"This one."

"Xanddeerrrrr," Buffy said, a cute pout on her face

"OK, OK," he laughed. "It's Wizard and Glass by Stephen King."

"Never heard of it?" Buffy replied, relieved that the pout still worked.

"Oh, it's the fourth in a series of fantasy books he's written. I read the first three as a kid, the fourth came out a few years ago. I was too busy to read it at the time, so I got it this morning."

"I didn't know you read much."

"Yeah, it's something I did to get away when I needed to. Pure escapism."

"So you want to go for that walk?"

"Of course." Xander stood, carefully placing the book down. With a dramatic flourish and slight waggling of eyebrows, he offered her his arm.

"Shall we, my fair lady."

Feeling a bit more confident about herself, Buffy smiled and took his arm.

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Angel Investigations, LA

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"Cordy, the sun went down exactly 2 minutes ago. Care to tell me what is so important that I'm singeing my hair just by being here?" Angel asked.

Cordelia eyed the souled vampire carefully. "To start with, the only reason your hair is like that is because you use way too much hair gel. Secondly, the sun went down 10 minutes ago, when I called you. It's taken you till now to get ready. And thirdly, I saw a vision, with your childe, Spike, dying."

At first Angel thought to defend himself, before the latter half of what she had said caught up with him. "What? How?"

Cordelia frowned, "I'm not sure. This was not a standard migraine inducing vision. To start with, I didn't need the industrial strength drugs that I normally do, which I will say was a great relief. I hope all future visions are like this, I can handle it a lot better than I used to."

"Cordy," Angel tried to interrupt; when that failed, he tried again a little louder. "CORDELIA."

"What?" she asked, confused.

Angel sighed. "Spike, dying?"

"Oh, yeah. All I got from the vision is that you need to go to Sunnydale tomorrow. Just you and only tomorrow." Cordelia hoped that repeating the salient parts would forestall any stupid questions.

"Why only me and why tomorrow?" Angel asked.

It was Cordelia's turn to sigh. "I'm just a messenger girl, remember?"

Angel suddenly snapped his glance at her. "If I can't go till tomorrow, why did you get me up so urgently?"

Cordelia smiled sweetly, "We're out of coffee, I need you to go get some from the store."

---

Buffy and Xander returned to the cabin. They had walked slowly through the beautiful forest, just enjoying the scenery.

"I guess we can go back to Sunnydale tomorrow," Xander said.

"Do we have to?" Buffy whined playfully.

"I'm afraid so. I need to get back to work and you need to start applying for college."

"You think I'll be able to get in for the fall semester?"

"Hopefully."

While Buffy had a nap in the living room, Xander cooked dinner. His culinary skills were far superior to hers; one of the few useful skills to come out of his neglected childhood. He had had to fend for himself most nights, his parents usually either unconscious from drinking or getting to that state.

When he had finished cooking, he walked into the living room and woke Buffy. They enjoyed their dinner together, continuing their light conversation from earlier.

That night, they were a little uncomfortable as they prepared for bed. Buffy tried hard to find a way to invite Xander to share the bed. She had slept so deeply and so peacefully while he had held her, that she wanted that comfort again. Xander wasn't looking forward to spending an uncomfortable night on the couch, but he also felt he shouldn't leave Buffy alone, in case she had a relapse.

It was with two different, but similar, sighs that they eventually fell asleep.

---

"Ready, Buff?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Look, we can always come back if you want. Steve said I could borrow this cabin whenever I want. Next time we can bring Dawn patrol!"

Buffy managed a smile. "Good idea," she said, trying to hide her disappointment at the idea of inviting anyone else along. The way she was feeling now, she didn't want to share Xander with anyone. Especially not with her younger sister, who still harbored a huge crush on him.

Xander started the car and they left the now spotless cabin. They had spent the morning tidying, cleaning and emptying the cabin. Buffy had happily announced that she was feeling a lot better. They were both glad that the slayer healing had taken care of the normal symptoms of withdrawal in record time.

The drive back to Sunnydale was a lot more enjoyable for Xander this time around. Buffy being a conscious participant was the most obvious change. They talked, as they had been doing all day and both felt at though they were taking the very first steps to getting their friendship back.

Buffy led the conversation, asking Xander in depth questions about his life and his job. She was determined to find out as much as she could about this new, take-charge, adult, Xander who she had only met a few days before.

He beeped the horn loudly as they pulled into the driveway, where they were met by three curious women.

Buffy got out of the car and walked slowly around the back to meet them. She was feeling nervous; the upcoming explanation and apology she would have to give were weighing heavily on her mind.

It was Dawn who moved first; she had immediately noticed a difference in her sister's walk. Buffy was moving confidently with her shoulders high. She was dressed with care and her makeup was flawless. Best of all, she had a smile on her face. Dawn blinked once, comparing the Buffy she had last seen to the Buffy she was seeing now. Her face erupted into huge smile and she lunged forwards and jumped at Buffy.

"You're back," she almost screamed with delight.

"I've only been gone a few days," Buffy said. Dawn's exuberance was contagious and she was smiling broadly as well.

No, no, no" Dawn replied, "You're poor, again. What happened? Where did you go? What did you do?"

Buffy smiled at her. "I'll explain it to you tonight, to all of you," she said as she looked at Willow and Tara, including them, "But it's all thanks to Xander. And yes, I am back, back for good."

Dawn squirmed out of Buffy's arms. She turned to Xander, who was leaning casually against the car with his legs casually crossed as he looked at them with faint amusement. For the second time in as many minutes, Dawn leaped at someone. This time, taking two or three steps first, she jumped into Xander's arms, kissing his cheek and repeating, "Thank you, thank you," over and over.

Xander smiled and hugged her. "It was my pleasure, Dawnmeister. You know I'd tear down the world for a smile from a pretty Summers' lady."

Dawn just hugged him again, and then reluctantly released him.

"Your sister's had a bad couple of days, Dawn. Let her have a nap first then she'll tell you what happened."

Dawn nodded and grabbed Buffy's hand, dragging her into the house. They could hear her through the open door as she ordered Buffy upstairs and checked that she had everything she would need.

Willow was the first to break the silence.

"You're not going to tell us what happened?"

"Nope," Xander replied, "This is Buffy's story, I hardly did anything. Listen to her story later with an open mind, she's been through a lot."

"So you said." Willow sighed a little, and then leant in and hugged Xander. "I think you did a lot more than you are saying Xand. I paid all the checks you left, remember?"

Xander reached out with one hand and grabbed an unsuspecting Tara, pulling her into the hug.

"You two are two of the four most important people in the world to me. I probably don't say this enough, but Wills, I love you, have all my life, you know that. Tara, you make my Wills happy, I couldn't think of a better partner for her." He kissed them both on the cheek, then released them, jumping into his SUV. "I've gotta fly, I'll hopefully see you both later." With that, he drove off.

Willow looked at Tara, a little shocked. "What the hell was that?"

"I don't know. It was almost as if he was saying goodbye."

Willow looked at the departing car. "Nah, He was just being weird."

It had been dark for a couple of hours when Buffy arrived downstairs. Pausing for a second, she smiled widely as she looked at her family.

Dawn was sprawled over a couch in a manner that only a teenager could find comfortable. Tara and Willow were sitting at opposite ends of the couch, their legs running along side each other's. Miss Kitty Fantastico lay between them, curled up. They were watching an old episode of the Simpsons, and there was an open pizza box on the table.

Buffy walked in, grabbed a slice of pizza and curled up comfortably in the free chair.

Feeling the curious gaze of the others on her, Buffy took a deep, nervous breath, and was about to begin her story, when the doorbell rang. She jumped up, momentarily thankful for the interruption. She hoped that it was Xander. There was a tall, dark man at the door, but as far as she was concerned, it was the wrong one.

"Angel?"

"Hi," the souled vampire said.

"What are you doing here?" Buffy asked; her tone curious.

"Cordelia had a vision. Can I come in?"

Buffy looked at him appraisingly, and then nodded stepped back. "Yeah, come in Angel," she invited, allowing the vampire access to her home.

A quick rearrangement of the seating meant that Dawn ended up perched on the couch next to Willow and Tara. They all looked at Angel, waiting for him to explain why he was here. Bitter experience had taught them that he only turned up when something major was going to happen.

Buffy's explanation of her absence for the past few days would have to wait.

"So, what's the bad news?" Willow finally asked.

"Cordy had a vision of Spike dying, and that I had to be here this evening."

There reactions to Angel's statement varied wildly, from Willow's almost total indifference to Dawn's look of shock and fear.

"We have to stop it," Dawn shouted, immediately jumping to her feet.

"Dawn, sit down." Buffy said loudly, a tone of command in her voice.

The others, who had been getting to their feet sat back down.

Buffy took a deep breath. "Before you go rescuing Spike, there's something you all need to know. I need you all to listen to me while I go through this, and then ask questions at the end."

---

Buffy normally opened the door to Spike's crypt with violence. Her slayer strength allowed her to slam open the heavy entrance with a bang. Xander, not having Slayer strength, had to resort to science. A pound of dynamite, detonated against the stone door, left only a smoking hole. Xander stepped through the dust cloud, and carefully placed a large crucifix in the doorway, then walked in and yelled "Spike!"

"Bloody 'ell, droopy." Spike stood in front of him, blood dripping down the front of his black t-shirt. "You made me spill my drink. What the hell are you doing?"

Before Spike finished, Xander moved fast and punched him in the face. Spike stumbled backwards and growled. His face vamped out instantly and he put all his body weight behind a punch aimed at Xander's nose. Xander stood still, a slightly mocking grin on his face. As Spike's fist got close, the vampire suddenly reeled back, his hands going to his head; he had forgotten about the behavior modifying chip that the Initiative had surgically implanted in his brain. Recognizing certain signals in Spike's electrical impulses, the chip determined that the vampire was trying to cause a human pain. It sent an electrical pulse directly to Spike's pain receptors, causing the vampire to double up in agony.

Xander laughed - a harsh sound with no humor in it. He jumped forwards and kicked Spike in the stomach as hard as he could, following it up immediately by grabbing the back of Spike's head and pulling it down hard, as he raised his knee at the same time. There was a loud crunching sound as Spike's nose splattered.

"What the fuckin' 'ell are you doing?" Spike repeated, backing away.

"Having a conversation with you, old boy," Xander mocked, mimicking an upper crust English accent. He crouched and spun, sweeping Spike's legs from under him. "Can't you feel how well we're communicating here?"

"I thought we'd have a nice little talk about our mutual interest, the Slayer."

"What do you want?"

Xander looked thoughtful, and then punched Spike again, grabbing him before he could fall. Spike tried to kick Xander back. His instinctive reaction to the pain Xander was inflicting was to lash out himself.

Again, he forgot about the chip and doubled up in agony.

"First, Spike, you can tell me what you meant when you told Willow that the Slayer would need you," Xander stated.

Spike looked a little confused, despite the fact that his vampiric healing was taking care of the injuries Xander had inflicted.

"When I get this damn chip out, I'll skin you alive, you wanker," he snarled.

Xander almost smiled and let loose another punch, followed by letting the vampire drop to the floor. Spike gasped in pain, trying to roll away from Xander, who kicked Spike in the stomach as hard as he could, his steel-toed work boots snapping several of Spike's ribs; the cracking sound they made was audible throughout the crypt.

"I asked you a question," Xander said calmly.

"She needs me for companionship; I'm the only one who understands what she's been going through."

Xander pulled a small crucifix from his pocket and pressed it against Spike's cheek. The sound of sizzling flesh lasted a second before Spike's enraged scream drowned it out.

"I'm sorry, William, I was looking for honest answers only."

"Buffy will kill you when she finds out what you've done to me," Spike gasped.

"Maybe," Xander said, unconcerned. "But at the moment, she's at home with Dawn, Willow and Tara and I'm here. So let's try again. Why would the slayer need you?"

"Because I get her drugs," Spike spat.

Xander nodded. "I know. Have you wondered where she's been the last few days, Spikey?"

Spike looked up at him, his eyes full of rage and hate.

"She's been with me, going cold turkey. You see, she doesn't need drugs anymore. This left me with a problem: What to do with the fucking bastard who got her onto drugs in the first place."

"Wait a bloody second," Spike interrupted, only for Xander to press the cross down again.

After Spike finished screaming, Xander said, "It's not very nice to interrupt Spike. As I was saying, Buffy's been telling me about everything she's done with you. How you gave her some softer drugs first, and then forced her into using heroin. How you blackmailed her into fucking you to feed her addiction."

Spike noticed the almost hidden emphasis Xander had put on the 'fucking part' and suddenly realized he had a way out of this. If he could get away now he could get some of his friends to kill Xander before anyone realized. The slayer would need him even more once Xander was gone; she would turn back to Spike for comfort.

"She told you it all did she?" Spike fixed his eyes on Xander, waiting for his chance. "Did she tell you about that time you came in here, when she was invisible? When I was doing naked push ups?"

Xander frowned at him, unsure where this was going.

"Naked push ups my arse. I was fucking her; she was writhing under me, getting off on me doing her in front of you. She was so up for it; I could feel how much wetter she got when you came in."

Xander rocked back a little, shocked, and Spike took his chance. He pushed against Xander, not hard enough to hurt him and set off the behavior chip, but hard enough to make him lose his balance. As Xander fell backwards, Spike jumped up and ran for the door, laughing.

Xander stood quickly, grabbing a baseball bat.

Spike's laughter came to an abrupt stop as he came within an inch of the large cross blocking his doorway.

"Oh shit."

Before Spike could turn around, Xander caught up with him and swung the bat as hard as he could, stepping forward and putting his body into the motion, just as he would when swinging at a thrown ball. The bat caught Spike just below the ear - the blow would have killed a mortal; it just rendered Spike unconscious.

Xander grinned and picked up the vampire. Throwing Spike in to the back of his SUV, he drove as fast as he could to the top of the cemetery. Getting out, he unceremoniously dumped the blond vampire onto the ground. Almost absently, he hit Spike again, ensuring the vampire would not awaken before he was ready for him.

Xander moved over to his SUV and got his work bag out; he opened it and got a small sphere and a piece of paper. Reading the paper carefully, Xander chanted aloud the words. As he finished the chant for the second time, he smashed the crystal sphere on the ground. There was a flash of light and a quiet bang, followed by an absolute silence.

Xander smiled and wandered over to his equipment again. He pulled out a bag of blood he had purchased from a butcher earlier and opened it carefully. With a slight sigh, he poured it over Spike's face. The warm blood woke the vampire, who desperately tried to get every drop. His face changed into its demonic form and focused on Xander. Spike realized he was free and jumped up, snarling. Deciding instantly that discretion was the better part of valor, Spike ran as fast as he could away from Xander. He had reached full speed when he ran straight into a solid, but invisible, barrier. The effect was as unforgiving as if Spike had run into a steel wall. He bounced backwards, unconscious before he hit the ground.

Xander walked down to the prone vampire. Picking him up by the heels, he dragged Spike back to the top of the hill, being careful to drag him over every rock he could find. Using some thick rope, he bound Spike's wrists to a large wooden crossbeam, forcing his arms far apart.

That done, he moved down and tightly tied Spike's legs both together and to another beam, at right angles to the first. The shape of the giant crucifix started to burn the vampire, but Xander ignored the slightly gross frying sound and smell as he doubled the amount of ropes holding the vampire down. Spike would not be able to escape, no matter how hard he tried.

"What the hell are you doing?" Spike demanded as he awoke again, arching his back to try and get away from the pain.

"I think you asked me that before," Xander said.

"Let me go, you cock sucking bastard."

"No," Xander said simply. "Didn't anyone ever tell you that it's a bad idea to insult your captor?"

"It never stopped you bloody lot."

"True, but we were only dealing with stupid vampires. You're dealing with your executioner. There is a big difference. Well, actually," Xander thought for a second, "it's not going to make a difference, you're going to die either way."

Xander picked up something from the floor. "Recognize this?" he asked.

Spike looked at the item and felt fear for the first time in many years. He looked at Xander's face; it was expressionless, not that of someone who was insane; it held a look that was much more terrifying: that of someone doing what they thought they must, regardless of the cost.

"Come, on Spikey, where's the big bad we all know and love?"

"It's a railroad spike," Spike said, struggling futilely against the wooden beams to which he was tied.



"Give the vampire a prize. To be precise, it's a special railway spike. Do you know why it's special?" Not waiting for a reply, Xander continued, "it's been blessed by a priest." He rubbed it gently against Spike's hand and the vampire hissed in pain.

Xander picked up a large hammer. He placed the sharp tip of the spike against Spike's left palm, and brought the hammer down hard. He ignored the agonizing scream of the vampire as he set to work. Xander started the same rhythm he used at work, hammering as quickly and effortlessly as he did when building wall frames on his job. With only 6 inches of the spike left hanging out, Xander bent the end of the spike over, ensuring that Spike would not be able to pull his hand off, even if he got out of the ropes.

Spike was frothing at the mouth with the pain he was undergoing, muttering under his breath. His words had no form and function; they could have been promises, threats or attempts at bargaining. Xander didn't care; he simply picked up the next spike and repeated the process with Spike's other hand.

Ten minutes later Xander finished pounding the last metal spike into Spike's left foot. He walked behind the delirious vampire and, using the pulley system he had erected earlier, pulled the large crucifix upright. A little out of breath, he looked up at the vampire, and shook his head.

There were small flames dancing around the spikes in Spike's body. The flames slowly burnt out one by one as the surrounding flesh died.

"Sunrise is in 6 hours. Enjoy your last night on earth Spike. I'll be here to watch you burn."

---

"So, I owe Xander everything," Buffy finished. She had explained everything that had happened, not just over the past few days, but since she had returned from the dead. She had taken the opportunity and unloaded everything she had been thinking and feeling. The effect was cathartic for her; she felt truly at peace for the first time since her return.

When she finished speaking, a deep silence enveloped the room. Angel was sitting completely still, in shock, unable to process what Buffy had just told them. Dawn, Willow and Tara all had visible tear tracks running down their cheeks. Dawn looked the worst, the shock that someone she cared so much about had not just lied to her, but had committed so much evil against her own sister, was physically hurting her.

Willow moved first, dislodging Ms. Kitty. She fell to her knees next to Buffy and grabbed her in a tight hug, crying. She whispered repeatedly, "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry." Tara and Dawn quickly joined them, also tearfully murmuring their apologies, as they held each other. They stayed there for several minutes, simply enjoying the sense of family they were feeling, before finally breaking apart. There were soft smiles on each of their faces as they looked at each other, understanding that this was their chance for a new relationship.

Angel spoke first. With a voice full of sadness, he said, "I know why I am here: to kill Spike."

For the first time, none of the present members of the Scooby gang protested against Spike's death.

"So, where is Xander tonight?" asked Dawn, realizing that Angel had been here for several hours and had not yet been insulted.

"He said he had some things to do." Buffy explained.

"Oh Goddess" whispered Willow. She looked at Tara desperately. "Tell me he's not..."

Tara looked at Willow, confused; suddenly, her face dropped. "Oh, no," she half whispered, realization dawning across her face.

"What?" Buffy and Dawn asked in unison.

"Before he left earlier, Xander said goodbye to us, after telling us he loved us both. It was as if he was saying goodbye permanently. We thought he was just being weird."

The others all came to the same conclusion. "He's gone after Spike."

Minutes later, they were all jammed in to Angel's car, heading for Spike's crypt.

"We have to find him. We can't let Spike kill him," Buffy said, sounding incredibly worried. Dawn just hugged her sister reassuringly.

"Spike can't hurt Xander, Buffy. He's chipped, remember?"

Buffy smiled and nodded in agreement, relieved.

Moments later they pulled to a stop outside of the crypt. They all jumped out and ran towards the shattered remnants of the crypt door. Angel was the fastest, but he had to stop so quickly that Buffy barreled into the back of him, almost knocking him over.

"What?" she snapped.

Angel just moved out the way and pointed at the large object blocking the doorway. "Xander must have put this here to try and make sure Spike couldn't follow him," Angel stated.

Buffy pulled it out of the way, vowing to kill Spike very slowly if he had managed to harm a hair on Xander's head.

Once inside the crypt, they found Spike's lair completely empty, and quickly returned to the car.

"What now?" Angel asked.

"We try and find them," Buffy announced firmly.

Deep in discussion about their next move, they drove off, completely missing the tire tracks that led to the top of the cemetery.

---

"Just let me go Xander, and I'll leave, never come back to Sunnydale in my life. You know I can't hurt any humans."

"No, Spike, you may not be able to physically hurt humans, but you will find a way to cause pain, it's all you know. And I don't want to take the risk of you having the chip removed."

Spike withdrew again into his pain. They had had similar conversations all night, Spike trying to get Xander to reconsider while Xander steadfastly refused to budge.

Xander moved and relaxed against a tree trunk, his watch alarm set to wake him before dawn.

---

It was only two hours before sunrise when the exhausted Scoobies arrived back at Spike's crypt. This time, however, they noticed the tire tracks and walked up the hill together. As they rounded a corner of the trail, they all came to an abrupt halt as they encountered a barrier.

They could see Xander resting against a tree, and Spike crucified in the middle of a clearing.

"This is weird," Angel announced, "I can't go any closer."

Willow nodded, "It's one of my spells. I gave it to Xander last year for his birthday. I'm surprised he is using it; it takes six months to prepare and uses a really rare crystal. I could only do the spell once. It forms a protective bubble that keeps all uninvited people out, as well as vampires and demons. It would take a powerful, and motivated, witch several hours to break through it."

Willow looked up at the crucified vampire, "I'm really not feeling that motivated to try."

The others nodded, distracted by the morbidly fascinating sight in front of them.

On the hill, Spike opened his eyes and saw them standing there.

"Help!" he cried, his voice full of pain.

He met Dawn's eyes first; with his enhanced senses, he could see a tear drop well up in her eyes.

"Nibblet?" he asked hopefully. She just shook her head slowly, the tear dropping from her eyelash and running down her cheek. She turned around and started to walk back to the car. Willow and Tara followed her.

"Well, fuck you, too," he snarled at their retreating backs.

Spike turned his gaze to Buffy. There were no tears in her eyes this time, just contempt and a little sadness. She, too, turned away without another look, this chapter of her life finally closed.

That just left Spike with Angel. Sire - Child relationships fostered a bond no one who hadn't been through it could understand. It was through this bond that Spike felt Angel's reaction, and Angel felt Spike's acceptance of defeat.

Angel turned and followed the others back to the car. Silently they all climbed and drove back to Buffy's place. Once there, Angel turned to Buffy.

"You mind if I crash on the couch?"

"Go ahead," Buffy whispered, "I'm going to bed."

In silence, the others followed her, each weighed down with their own thoughts.

---

An annoying beeping sound woke Xander. He stretched and checked his watch. It was thirty minutes before dawn.

A single tear had dripped down Spike's face; he knew he was alone, without friends and was about to die. His head was hanging low, the strain of keeping it straight too much for him, even with his vampiric super strength. If he had been human, he might have died of asphyxiation. The pain caused by the cross had receded into his memory; the constant agony was no longer having the same effect.

"How can you send me to hell?" Spike croaked, barely able to talk through the pain. Spike cursed his rapid healing for the first time. It meant that the flesh surrounding the holy spikes was constantly healing, only to touch the blessed metal again. The flesh would then burn, causing Spike to scream under his breath, before dying once more and causing the cycle to begin again.

Xander looked at Spike, tilting his head to one side.

"Pretty easily," he admitted. "I sent Angel to hell with his soul; what makes you think that I would have a problem sending a vampire without a soul there?"

"I believe that, as far as the afterlife is concerned, your destination is fixed after judgment is made over how you lived your life. You've ensured yourself a trip to hell. I'm just making it happen now."

"What about Dawn? She'll be heartbroken that I've gone. She'll hate you," Spike lied, throwing everything he could think off at Xander, in a desperate attempt to save himself.

"Possibly," Xander admitted. "But it's worth it, to ensure that you don't corrupt her as well."

Before Spike could continue, Xander changed the subject. "Anything you're curious about, before you die?"

"Where did you find a priest who would bless your spikes?"

Xander laughed and reached into his bag and pulled out a certificate. He held it up for Spike to read.

Spike read it slowly, then re-read it. He laughed with grudging respect.

"You took a correspondence course to become a priest of the Church of Elvis?"

Xander smiled and nodded. "I blessed the stakes myself."

Xander tilted his head and looked up at Spike. "I wonder what would happen if I were to bless you?"

Spike looked worried; he was sure that the answer would mean more pain for him.

Xander looked around; the ambient light was signaling the fast approaching dawn. "Any last words, Spike?"

"Let me go?" Spike asked.

"fraid not."

"Well, tell Dawn I'm sorry then."

"You actually care for her?" Xander asked, curious.

"Yeah, I guess," Spike replied, before falling silent.

"Spike," Xander said, a few minutes later. "Tell Angelus I said 'hi' when you see him."

Spike snarled, and spat at Xander. Xander just laughed at him, moving directly in front of the vampire.

The sun finally became visible, bright rays appearing over the hilltop. Spike started to smoke as he felt every particle in his body catch fire, but he refused to scream out loud. As the sun bore down on him fully, Spike opened his mouth in a soundless curse, and then exploded into dust.

Behind him, the cross was almost unaffected, only a few burn marks marring the smooth surface.

In neatly chiseled words, across the horizontal beam Spike had been covering, was the simple inscription:

"Rot In Hell."



# Like a Cat in a Bag

## Part 5

Xander watched the dust that had been Spike settle on the ground. He shrugged and picked up his bag, cancelling the protection spell with a word. As Xander walked back to his car, he enjoyed the feeling of the sunshine on his skin. Stifling a yawn, he drove to Buffy's house.

As quietly as he could, Xander opened the front door and crept in to the living room.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Xander asked himself quietly, as he discovered the sleeping vampire on the couch. He walked into the kitchen, and smiled as he saw Miss Kitty curled up on the counter.

"Hey Miss Kit," Xander said, stroking the cat gently. He quietly removed her collar, and crept back into the living room.

A few moments later Xander walked upstairs; he found the spare room empty, as he had hoped. He undid his boots and collapsed on the bed. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

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Buffy slowly opened one eye, and then winced at the bright sunlight filling her room.

"Dawn?" she asked sleepily, hoping that whatever it was, it would go away quickly.

"Yep, right first time." Dawn said, grinning. "It's time for lunch."

"Huh?" Buffy asked, her mind still not functioning due to lack of sleep. She had not slept well; she had stared at the ceiling for a long time, worrying about Xander's motives for killing Spike.

"Food, Buffy, for the starving. Me!" Dawn said again, trying to pull her sister out of bed. "It's one in the afternoon, we slept through breakfast. Come on, it's time to eat. Growing teenager here."

Buffy watched Dawn's face for a second, wondering when she had last seen her sister like this. She realized with regret, that it had been before her Mom had died. She opened her other eye and sat up. Impulsively, she hugged Dawn tightly, and kissed her on the cheek.

"I love you, Dawn," Buffy stated, looking her in the eyes.

Dawn just smiled widely, "I love you, too. Now get that Slayer ass outta bed."

Buffy allowed herself to be dragged from her warm retreat. She paused and slid on a pair of shorts over her panties, and followed her sister towards the stairs.

"We should wake Willow and Tara."

Dawn nodded and followed her sister. They opened the door to the Witches' room and paused. Buffy hugged Dawn to her as they both smiled. Willow was curled up against Tara, who was hugging Willow close. For a brief second, Buffy could see the sweet innocent Willow she had first met all those years ago. Shifting her gaze, Buffy was pleased with the look of contentment and bliss on Tara's face. Buffy released Dawn and moved next to the bed.

"Willow, Tara," Buffy said quietly, trying to wake the witches as gently as possible.

"Go 'way, Buff," Willow mumbled, sleepily. "End of world can wait. Sleepy now."

"Willow," Buffy repeated, "it's the afternoon, time for food."

At the mention of food, Willow's eyes flew open, as she moved from almost asleep to awake in an instant. She turned to Tara and kissed her on the lips.

"Come on sleepy, time for food." Tara groaned against Willow protestingly. She tried to snuggle back down into the comforter. She froze as she felt Willow's hands edging towards her stomach.

"I'm awake, I'm awake," Tara laughed, scrambling away from Willow's hands.

They trooped downstairs together. Tara and Willow had each pulled on a pair of jeans, a tee shirt, and were barefoot.

Dawn stopped at the bottom of the stairs and turned to her sister.

"Hey, I wonder if we're making enough noise to raise the dead."

As if on cue, Angel sat up on the couch and turned to look at them.

Willow, Buffy and Tara groaned at Dawn. "Did you have to say that?" Buffy asked.

Dawn nodded, "yep, been taking lessons from Xander."

Angel stood, as he did, they could hear a small tinkling sound.

Willow looked around, dropping to her knees. "Here Miss Kitty" she cooed gently, looking for their cat. Miss Kitty, hearing her mistress call, jumped down from the counter in the kitchen and sauntered slowly towards her. The cat sat down in front of Willow and yawned at her, before rolling on to her side, imperiously demanding her stomach be rubbed.

Willow smiled, and enthusiastically set to work. She noticed that Miss Kitty's collar was not in its normal place, the cat's neck. She looked at Tara and was about to comment on it, when she remembered she had just heard it. She smiled to herself as she realized where the collar was. Turning so her back was to Angel, she looked her girlfriend in the eyes, pointed to Miss Kitty's neck, and then flicked her eyes towards the vampire.

Tara looked confused for a second, and then smiled widely.

Angel stood and stretched. When he heard the tinkling sound again, he turned and looked at Willow, who was still stroking the stationary cat. Again, the sound of a small bell accompanied his move.

Buffy and Dawn were both staring at him, trying to work out what they were hearing. Dawn suddenly laughed loudly and pointed to Angel's shirt pocket. Angel looked down, as Buffy, Willow and Tara joined Dawn in laughing. Attached neatly to his pocket, was Miss Kitty's collar, the small bell on it swinging freely with his every movement.

Angel instantly realized the source of the bell. "Xander!"

Xander woke with when he heard Angel yell. Instantly understanding its source, he decided to get up and face the others. He dressed lightly, pulling on a pair of shorts, a shirt and some sneakers, before walking downstairs.

"What's up, Deadboy?" Xander asked with a smirk.

Angel responded with a growl. Xander jumped away from him playfully. "Careful or we'll have to get you a muzzle."

Buffy watched them with a slightly nostalgic smile, for a second, it seemed like old times.

"Well, now that I'm awake, I'm hungry. What do we have for lunch?" Xander asked the important question.

Willow and Tara glanced at each other, a guilty look passing between them. "Nothing?" Willow asked, "We didn't really have time to go shopping."

Xander shrugged, "Guess it's the lunch of the lazy everywhere. What do you all want? My treat."

After memorizing the requests for different fast foods, Xander turned his head towards Angel. "Dead Boy?"

Angel looked a little surprised, and then decided to take it at face value. "Could you stop at a butcher's?"

Xander just nodded, and turned to Dawn, "Coming?"

Dawn smiled brightly, nodded, then scampered upstairs, to get changed.

Xander walked out to his car and started the engine; he turned the radio on as he waited for Dawn.

Xander drove his car smoothly with the radio blaring loudly. Dawn opened the window and settled back against the seat, not really sure how to start the conversation she wanted to have with him. He pulled to stop outside Buffy's old place of work, the Doublemeat Palace. They got out of the car, but before they could go in, Xander stopped Dawn. He lent his back against the hood of his car.

"Buffy told you what happened?" Xander half asked, half stated.

Dawn nodded, looking at Xander, noting that he appeared nervous.

Xander took a deep breath, before blurting out, "I had a talk with Spike last night and it didn't go well. I couldn't trust him not to do it again, so I killed him." Xander frowned, really wishing he had managed to say that without sounding like an insensitive murderer.

Dawn winced, a tear dropped down her cheek.

Xander felt his stomach turn over as he interpreted the tear as a mixture of shock and anger. He ran his left hand through his hair.

"Look, Dawn, I know you loved Spike and he loved you too. His last words were to tell you that he was sorry. After what he did to Buffy, I wasn't willing to take the chance that he might do the same to others. He may have had a chip in his brain, but it only stopped him from causing physical pain, from harming people directly. There are tons of ways that he could have gotten around that, if he really wanted to."

His meandering monologue was stopped as Dawn launched herself into his arms and hugged him as tightly as she could.

"Xander," Dawn said, her mouth near his ear, "I know what Spike did; he raped my sister. I would never have felt safe with him again.

"I used to tell him everything; we'd talk for hours." she continued, "Now it makes me wonder what he was doing with that information. Was he looking for ways to affect me? Did he want to control me too?"

"I don't think so, Dawn." Xander said, holding her like a little girl, stroking her back, comfortingly. "Spike was a complex person. He managed to separate what he was doing with your sister completely from his relationship with you. Like I said, his last words were an apology to you. I think he

had as many feelings for you as it was possible for him to have. Try and remember that about him."

Xander felt he could be generous about Spike's feelings as he hoped it would make Dawn feel better about what happened. He was concerned about the effect the vampire's betrayal would have on the young girl he loved as his sister.

Dawn leaned back and smiled at him. "Xander, if you aren't in a serious relationship the day I turn eighteen, I'm coming after you."

Xander laughed, smiled, and said "If I'm not, I'll be expecting you Dawnie." He figured that he would cross that bridge if and when he came to it.

They got out of the car and got enough fast food to feed a small battalion, before stopping at a butcher's on the way home.

After parking the car in front of Buffy's house, they walked in together, laughing.

"These bags are filled with the delicious goodness that is fast food, all things calorific-ally spectacular. Err. Not that one Will." Xander said, leaning forwards and grabbing one of the bags from her and tossing it at Angel.

Angel looked surprised as he caught it, since he hadn't really expected Xander to get him anything. He retreated to the kitchen, well aware that a vampire's feeding habits were not conducive to others enjoying their meal.

The conversation was light during lunch, with them all feeling as though this was a meal out of time, that maybe Giles would walk in at any second and pinch his nose, or maybe Cordelia would arrive and complain about something. None of them wanted it to end.

For Buffy, Willow, and Xander, this was a feeling they felt they had lost when they left High School. Circumstances and bad decisions had meant that little get-togethers like this had been very rare, unless there was yet another apocalypse on the horizon.

Xander and Willow teased each other mercilessly about the littlest incidents, each revealing embarrassing episodes from their pasts. Tara, was carefully cataloguing each one of Willow's, for future use. They were all laughing as Xander recounted a tale of how Willow had forced him to wear one of her dresses, as punishment for accidentally tearing one of her dolls dresses.

"So there I was, on my knees in Willow's bedroom, wearing a dress. Willow was lying on her back in front of me, laughing so hard she was almost screaming, wearing only her favorite Kermit the frog underwear when her Mom came in," Xander said. "For some reason, we weren't left alone in Willow's bedroom for quite some time after that."

Willow blushed an interesting shade of red as the others laughed again.

As Angel rejoined them, Xander asked "Wills, Tara, give me a hand getting rid of this mess?" He motioned towards the empty fast food wrappers lying on the table.

It was obvious to all that it was an excuse for Xander to talk to them. Willow and Tara followed Xander into the kitchen, leaving Angel, Dawn and Buffy alone.

Willow hopped up onto the kitchen counter, pulled Tara in front of her and wrapped her arms around her girlfriend. She placed her chin on Tara's shoulder.

"So, what do you want, Xand?"

"Am I that transparent?" Xander asked, a mock scowl on his face.

"Yep," said Tara, "It's obvious what you want. Isn't it, Willow?"

"Errr-"

"He wants a three way with us, after we perform hot lesbian sex for him," Tara pronounced to complete silence from the others.

She turned her head and looked first at Willow's extremely red face, then Xander's fire hydrant red face. She waited for a second, curious to see if either of them would be able to respond. She had long suspected that it was a fantasy they had both entertained at one time or another, but she knew them well enough not to worry about it. She'd had more than her fair share of fantasies over the year and knew them to be essentially harmless. She laughed suddenly.

"Gotcha!"

Willow and Xander had identical looks of chagrin on their faces.

"Oh, it's the innocent ones," Xander stated, after a moments pause. "You always have to watch out for the innocent ones."

Xander moved forwards, as Willow tightened her legs around her lover and slid her arms up, holding Tara in an effective full nelson.

"Xander taught me this when we were younger, Tara. We used to use it on Jesse when he did something bad," Willow purred into Tara's ear.

"Revenge is sweet." Xander placed his hands gently on her sides, his fingers squirming under her tee shirt. "As you seem to have taken his place as part of our group, it's only fitting that we use this on you."

Tara was shocked. She had felt wonderful yesterday, when Xander had said that he loved her, and that he thought she was a wonderful partner for

Willow. Willow had never been a big part of her life; she had always felt that she was fighting as hard as she could just to stand still. Willow had often talked to her about Jesse, and how important he had been to her and to Xander.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Xander started to tickle her. She screamed and squirmed violently, trying to escape.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she wheezed, laughing hard, "Stop! Stop it, please!" she begged for mercy, in between giggles

"What do you think, Willow? Think she's had enough?"

Willow looked at her hysterical girlfriend. "I guess so," she said reluctantly.

Xander stopped and backed away carefully, his hands instinctively moving in front of his groin. He watched for retaliatory attacks. Willow held Tara up, as her legs began to go. Finally regaining control, she wiped her eyes and laughed.

"What did you want to tell us, Xander?" Tara asked, deciding to change the subject as quickly as possible.

Xander winced. "Look, you know what happened to Buffy now?"

Tara and Willow nodded in unison.

"Well, last night I killed Spike," Xander stated bluntly.

"We know," Willow said. "You used my spell. I put a tag on it so it would notify me when you used it. Tara and I watched everything," she lied convincingly. "I've got to say it was imaginative, I would have never thought of crucifying a vampire."

Xander just shrugged. "I've just got to tell Buffy now. I told Dawn this morning."

"What about Angel?" Willow asked.

"Him? He doesn't count," Xander replied with a grin.

Xander left the kitchen, going back to the living room while Tara repaired her tear damaged face.

Angel had been brooding quietly on the couch. He had taken a number of emotional body shots over the last forty-eight hours. First, finding out that Spike was going to die, then realizing that Spike's death was justified, after learning that the bleached vampire had not only taken advantage of an emotionally distraught Buffy to rape her repeatedly, but that he had also hooked her on heroin. The latest shock was learning that Xander, of all people, had executed Spike with a ruthlessness that he had not thought the young carpenter capable of.

Last night had been the first time Angel had been willing to hunt Spike down. He had been willing to kill Spike himself in the past, but had never wanted his Child dead enough to put any effort into it. He wasn't sure how he felt about Xander usurping his privileges.

Buffy and Dawn had been ignoring him, giving him brooding space, while they talked about Dawn's school and Buffy's plans.

Xander walked in to the living room on the way to his car, he wanted to get his bag out and show the others his new certificate.

"Buffy, Dawn, Deadboy." he greeted the occupants with a smile, heading towards the door,

Angel, seeing an opportunity, reached out to grab Xander's shoulder. "What do you know about-"

What Angel had been about to ask Xander about was abandoned, as the vampire released Xander's shoulder with a yell of pain as fast as he grabbed it. He danced away, waving his hand wildly. Tara and Willow appeared in the doorway, drawn by the shout of pain. They were shocked to see Angel's hand smoking.

They all turned and looked at Xander as one. He was standing where Angel had released him, a slight smirk on his face. "Tut, tut, tut. This isn't High School, Angel. We've all grown up since then. It might have slipped your notice, but I am not fifteen anymore."

It was Dawn who asked the question on everyone's mind. "How?"

Xander pulled down his collar. Stitched neatly into the fabric were 5 silver crosses.

"The ultimate in anti-vampire love bite protection." Xander said with a smile, "It comes in all shapes and sizes, and if you buy today, we'll throw a free bible, and in this special, once-in-a-lifetime offer, we'll guarantee your money back if it fails to work against the undead. Simply show up at our studio, in broad daylight, with proof that it failed, for your full refund."

Angel was looking at Xander curiously, and noticing his stare, Xander continued, "Sorry Angel, I don't swing that way."

For the first time since he had been turned, Angel came close to blushing. The others were all laughing. It had been a very long time since Xander had acted the clown to such an extent, and they all realized how much they had missed it.

"There's something different about you, but I can't place it."

Xander smiled at the vampire. "Score one for the breathing impaired. Be right back." Xander vanished out the front door.

Angel turned his head back, to see four women staring at him.



"What?" he asked.

"You're enjoying this," Buffy said slowly, "you haven't frowned in 5 minutes."

Angel shrugged. "My sense of humor isn't completely dead. Besides, Xander has changed a little, his humor isn't as grating as it used to be."

Xander returned and handed Dawn the same certificate he had shown Spike the night before. As she read it, her eyes widened. She read it again, and then collapsed on the floor in hysterical laughter.

Buffy pulled the certificate out of her hand, and read it as well. Her reaction was remarkably similar to Dawn's.

Angel reached for it next, since he was nearest, but Willow interceded.

"Affluo," she commanded. The paper flew out of Buffy's hand and arrived in hers a second later. Willow laughed outloud, showing it to Tara. Tara looked amused, but didn't break into laughter, she had already laughed harder today than she had in years, and didn't want to do it again. She handed it to Angel.

Angel read it slowly, and then read it again.

"The Church of Elvis?" he asked with disbelief.

Xander nodded.

"You took a correspondence course and joined the Church of Elvis as a priest?" Angel asked again, making sure he had the facts right.

Angel paused, digesting. What he did next shocked everyone. He laughed, loudly and fell back on the couch.

"OK, Xander, I underestimated you."

Xander looked shocked, an expression mirrored on the faces of the others. He hadn't expected that. Realizing that he was at a cross-roads with his relationship with Angel, Xander decided to follow suit. "Accepted," he said lightly, and offered his hand. Years of animosity were forgotten as they shook hands for the first time.

"Well, as you're here," Xander started, changing his mind about telling the souled vampire about Spike, "let's go into the kitchen, I want to talk to you about something."

Angel followed Xander into the kitchen. Xander hopped up on to the kitchen counter, the same place Willow had sat earlier. He shut the blinds on the kitchen window, blocking out the sunlight, as Angel turned the lights on.

"I take it Buffy told you?" Xander asked, deliberately vague.

"About the drugs," Angel confirmed.

Xander nodded, "Look, you probably felt it this morning, so I'm guessing you already know. I killed Spike last night."

Angel looked uncomfortable. "I did know, and I felt the same way. But couldn't you have asked Willow to restore his soul or something?"

"Angel," Xander said, looking the vampire directly in the eye. Angel braced himself; recognizing that Xander was going to say something straight. "I didn't think that we should restore your soul, I thought that we should have just ended it there and then. The others disagreed, as they did with Spike. I admit, I might have been hasty back then, but faced with the same thing, I would make the same decisions now."

Angel nodded. There was silence between the two of them, before Xander smiled.

"Besides, you're being punished now. You're taking care of Cordy, and if that isn't punishment enough, I don't know what is."

Angel smiled again; recent experience had shown him exactly what Xander meant.

"Can you send Buffy in?" Xander said, indicating that the discussion was over. Angel nodded and departed.

Xander opened the blinds as he waited; bright sunlight filled the room again.

"Hey Buff," he said seriously, as Buffy walked in and took the same position Angel had, opposite him.

"What's up, Xand?"

Xander was almost used to this confession by now. "I killed Spike last night."

Buffy nodded slowly. "Why?"

"Because of what he did."

"Didn't you think that I would be able to resist him again?"

"I didn't think about that," Xander lied. "Spike earned his death through his actions; I just made it happen."

Buffy nodded. The primary reaction she felt was relief, although she been upset and angry earlier, both at Xander and at Spike.

Xander suddenly changed the subject, his warm eyes suddenly emptied of all expression.

"What happened when you were invisible, Buffy?" Xander asked quietly.

Buffy paled dramatically. "What do you mean?" she asked, desperately stalling for time.

"When I was looking for you, and went into Spike's crypt," Xander elaborated as he fixed his gaze on Buffy, as he had with Angel. Buffy felt trapped under it, as if Xander was looking deep into her soul.

"What happened, Buffy?"

Buffy whispered, "I was fucking Spike." Her face flooded with I thought it was finally over. That you would find out about me, that you would leave me in disgust."

She tried to find the words to describe the complicated emotions she had been feeling. "After you left, I threw Spike off me. I left him, I was determined to get away from him, but I couldn't. I needed the drugs," she confessed shamefaced, her voice almost a whisper.

Buffy's talk was interrupted as she first saw Xander's feet come into view, then felt his arms reaching around her, hugging her tightly. She leaned into his shoulder and cried, as Xander held her, her tears falling freely as she reveled in his touch. She closed her eyes and just relaxed against him, as she felt his hands stroke up and down her back.

All she could think, as she was comforted, was, "Oh God, this feels good."

Xander held her tightly. As he inhaled, all he could smell was the sweet perfume of her hair. He admitted to himself that she felt wonderful in his arms. He also realized he didn't want to let her go.

But eventually he remembered his earlier decisions; not to let Buffy rule his life. So he released her gently, and took a step or two back.

Buffy watched him, for a second, immediately missing the feel of his arms around her. Xander looked away from her briefly, checking that he wasn't going to trip over anything. Because of that, he missed the look of determination that came over Buffy's face as she watched him. For a second, her eyes flashed as she made a decision, a decision that involved a path she wanted her life to take.

Buffy chose Xander.



## Like a Cat in a Bag Part 6

Xander walked back into the living room, alone.

"Where's Buffy?" Willow asked.

Xander smiled a little. "She's phoning Giles, bringing him up to date on what's happened."

He sat down on the couch next to Dawn, who beamed up at him happily.

"So, what's the plan for this evening?" he asked.

"I'm going back to LA as soon as it gets dark, no need for me to stay here any longer," Angel offered first.

Xander nodded. "What about you three lovely ladies?"

"No real plans here," Tara said.

"Yeah," Willow agreed, "We're completely planless."

"So, how about a quick patrol, like we used to, then an evening of fun, entertainment and the Xand-man shaking his stuff on the hallowed floors of the Bronze?"

Willow and Tara quickly voiced their agreement, so Xander turned to Dawn.

"What about you? gonna come with us and save me from the embarrassment of dancing badly alone?" He grinned and turned to Tara, explaining. "Dancing badly with someone else is much less embarrassing than doing it alone."

Tara giggled, as Dawn blushed slightly.

"Sure, Xander, I'd love to go."

Xander thought for a second. "I've got to go back to work tomorrow, so why don't we have a meal in a restaurant first, then patrol, then do the Bronze. Angel, if you want to go back home a little later, your more than welcome to join us."

Angel shook his head. "Thanks, Xander, but I want to get back. No telling what trouble Cordelia's been up to," he said with a light smile.

"Ok." Xander looked at his watch. "Why don't we meet back here at seven? I'll go home and get changed, then pick everyone up at 7. "

He winked at the three girls. "Put on your prettiest party dresses, ladies. When I walk in with four beautiful women, I want every other guy there to explode with jealousy." With that fantasy said, Xander exited just in time to avoid the barrage of pillows thrown from Willow and Tara, and surprisingly, Angel.

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Giles slowly hung up the phone. He relaxed back into his comfy chair and steepled his hands over his chest. Finally, a small smile appeared on his face, he stood and walked over to his desk. He sat and began a small report for the Watcher's Council.

"Dear Sir,

It has come to my attention that the current Slayer, Buffy Anne Summers, was recently incapacitated with the flu, rendering her unfit to patrol. During this period, regular patrols were carried out by the Vampire, Spike and the Wiccan's, Willow Rosenberg and Tara Maclay.

In the course of one of these patrols, the Vampire was stabbed in the back with a stake by a newly risen Vampire, causing him to disintegrate. This new vampire, was himself killed seconds afterwards by the two witches.

I feel it should be emphasized in official records, that, the famed Master Vampire, Spike, was killed by a fledgling vampire.

Buffy has since recovered from her incapacitation and has renewed regular nightly patrols.

Sincerely,

R Giles Esq."

Giles smirked, an expression that did not really fit his image of a respected and sedate librarian.

"Spike, within a week, the entire world will believe that you were killed by a fledgling vampire less than thirty minutes old. Your legacy of pain and torture will be forgotten. Instead of being regarded as one of the most vicious proponents of impalement, you will be remembered as a joke," Giles said to the empty air in front of him.

He stood and poured himself a small glass of the whisky. Raising it generally in the direction of America, he saluted the glass, and then drank it

down.

"Good show, Xander," he whispered to himself. Giles sat back down in his chair and returned to his research, whistling happily under his breath.

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"Where's Xander?" Buffy asked as she entered the front room.

"He's gone home to get changed," Angel said. "He's taking all of you out to a restaurant at seven. The others are upstairs getting ready."

Buffy smiled, "Thanks."

She sat down on the chair opposite him. "How are you, Angel?"

"In what way?"

"All of this." Buffy waved her hands to encompass everything.

"Well, I was sent here yesterday by a vision from Cordelia, to find out that my ex-girlfriend was addicted to drugs and sleeping with my childe. Then, after I arrive here, I find my childe being executed by Xander, of all people. Then, to top it all off, I find that I'm actually starting to like him. It's been a fun trip."

Buffy recoiled back, at the bitterness in Angel's words.

"Why couldn't you tell me?" Angel asked sadly, looking at his one-time love.

"I couldn't tell anyone, Angel," Buffy said quietly. "I was in a very bad place; I couldn't see a way out. I couldn't even tell my best friends."

"I don't know what we are these days, Angel. In a way I will always love you. You were my first love, my universe at the time. But those days are gone now; young Buffy has died twice since then. I've been to heaven and I've lived in hell. I've tasted darkness to many times. What I crave now is the light."

"Xander," Angel stated.

"Yeah. Strange, huh?"

"Not really. He's always been here. Are you sure you're not just feeling grateful for what he has done this last week?"

"No. You were dark, handsome, mysterious and powerful. You were dangerous and made me feel excited about what I do, about being the Slayer. Xander makes me feel excited about being me, about being Buffy Summers, about being alive. He makes me feel safe and loved. I want that feeling permanently. I think I can give him what he wants: a relationship with a fully committed partner and mate."

Angel stood, he held out a hand to Buffy who took it, standing with him. Angel hugged her, internally saying goodbye to his golden haired goddess. "Good luck, Buffy, I hope you're happy."

Buffy hugged him back. "Thank you. You need to find someone yourself now."

Angel just smiled crookedly into her hair.

On the stairs behind them, Dawn was stood, watching them. <Cool, she's getting back with Angel, that's one out of the way> she thought to herself with a large happy smile. <You're going to be mine, Xander. I'm going to make sure of that.>

Moving back upstairs, the younger Summers knocked on Willow's door. As the redhead opened it and peered around, Dawn anxiously asked. "Can you help me with my makeup?"

"Sure, Dawn," Willow replied, "Come on in."

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One of the things Xander most loved about his job was the clothing that it allowed him to buy. While his dress sense may not have been the best in the world, it had settled down a lot since his teenage years. He stuck with what he now knew looked good on him; a pair of smart black pants, an extremely white shirt and a leather jacket. The jacket had a special lining he had added when he first purchased it, filled with stakes, holy water, crosses and a small first aid kit. All of it equipment which he knew he would need on patrol. Instead of matching stylish shoes, he put on a pair of black steel toed boots. They added an inch to his height, but more importantly, they did a lot more damage when he kicked anything with them.

Pausing for a final check, he smiled at himself in the mirror, then grabbed his car keys and left to drive back to Buffy's house.

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Buffy looked through her wardrobe, Tara had told her the full plans earlier, and she was now freshly showered, her hair neatly blown dry, with her make up painstakingly applied and perfect.

"So, Xander wants us all looking our best," she muttered to herself. After a moments consideration, she removed a dress that was protected by a dry cleaning bag. "This will have him in a puddle on the floor." She smirked to herself as she began to dress.

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"Janice, I'm in love with an older guy," Dawn announced, as soon as her friend picked up the phone.

"Hey, Dawn," Janice said. "Who?"

"Xander."

"The beefcake construction guy?"

"Yep."

"He's hot."

"Duh, I already know. You know how I was talking about Buffy, and how she's been really strange recently?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, Xander took Buffy away for a few days, and whatever he said to her, it really straightened her out. She came back like the old Buffy."

"Cool. But doesn't that mean your sister and Xander will be getting together?"

"Nope," Dawn said excitedly, delighted to share what she had seen. "I saw her hugging her old boyfriend earlier."

"I hate to rain on your parade, girl, but what makes you think you've got a chance? He's good looking, drives an expensive car and is a really nice guy."

"We were having a conversation earlier, and I told him that if he was still unattached when I turn 18, he's mine."

"Well, don't keep me waiting, what did he say?" Janice asked, getting excited for her friend.

"He agreed!"

"Really?!! That's so cool, Dawn!"

"I know, but there's a problem."

"What?"

"How do I make sure he'll still be available then?"

"Easy. Make him want to wait," Janice said, with all the experience her 16 years had given her.

"How?"

"Dress to kill. Use what you have, girl, make him want you so bad he's willing to wait."

"I can't do that," Dawn said, blushing at the phone.

"Then your going to lose him to some skank who will," her friend warned her.

"You think Xander would go for me?" Dawn asked, her voice nervous and doubting.

"Sure, men love younger girls, it makes them feel young and powerful or something."

"OK," Dawn almost squeaked, making her decision. "I'm gonna go for it. Thanks, Janice."

"No problem, just let me know how it goes," Janice paused for a second. "Let me know what base you let him get to."

"Janice!" Dawn shouted at her friend.

"What? What?" she asked innocently. Sadly, her giggle spoiled her act.

"OK, I've gotta get ready. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"k. Dawn?"

"Yeah?"

"Lose the bra." With that last piece of advice, Janice hung the phone up. She smiled to herself, then rolled over on her wide four poster bed and went back to reading her Sweet Valley High book.

"Ok," Dawn mumbled to herself, "What have I got that's going to make it obvious to Xander that it's worth his while waiting for me?"

She flicked through her wardrobe quickly, "Dorky... childish... yuck... what the hell was I thinking?" she commented on each outfit as she sorted through them, before stopping as a particular item caught her eye. She grinned, unconsciously echoing her sister, "hopefully, this will leave him in a

puddle on the floor."

Willow whistled as she looked at Tara. "Should I be jealous?" she asked playfully. "You don't dress up like this for me." Tara grinned and bent to kiss her girlfriend.

"Nope, Xander gets to look, but you get to unwrap, later."

Willow laughed softly, "Xander gets to look?" she asked, her eyes lighting up. "What happened to shy Tara?"

Tara blushed a little. "She's still here; she's just becoming a little more secure in herself and her relationships with her lover and her friends."

"Ahhh," said Willow, with a smile of understanding. "And this is all due to Xander?"

Tara nodded, agreeing.

"What?" she asked, as Willow's expression turned to one of Machiavellian glee.

"Wait here for a second." she commanded, disappearing into the closet. It was Tara's turn to whistle as she returned. "You like?"

Tara nodded eagerly. "Absolutely!"

Willow smiled happily, repeating what seemed to be a divinely inspired refrain. "This is going to leave Xander in a wet puddle on the floor."

Xander appeared at the Summers' residence at exactly seven pm. Dusk had fallen fifteen minutes earlier; Angel's car was already gone.

He let himself in through the front door, and shouted up the stairs. "Our reservations are at 7:45, guys, we need to leave soon."

Four different voices shouted variations of "Coming, Xand."

Willow appeared first, walking downstairs slowly. Xander's eyes opened wide, pleasantly surprised by the vision that greeted him.

"Wow," he said, with great male appreciation.

Willow smiled happily and twirled for him. Her shoulder length hair was centre parted and fell in gentle waves down each side of her face, framing her eyes perfectly. She was wearing an extremely low cut white with embroidered bows on the chest, which stopped at mid thigh, emphasizing her shapely legs. She flashed her brilliant smile at him, and then laughed at his expression.

Xander's attention was drawn from Willow to Tara as she descended the stairs. His eyebrows, already raised from Willow, threatened to recede into his hairline.

Tara had decided to go with traditional, and was wearing her classic 'little black dress'. She looked a bit nervous as she descended the stairs. Despite her earlier bravado, she was very wary about the dress she was wearing; it was totally different than anything she had worn in public before. It had been ordered from a catalogue a few years before, after she had broken up with her previous girlfriend. She had never had the courage to even try it on, let alone wear it in public.

She watched for Xander's reaction carefully. The love of her life's approval had been the first step, and she now wanted the same validation from someone she was coming to love as a brother.

He didn't let her down.

Xander simply wolf whistled appreciatively. Tara grinned, careful not to breathe too deeply as she was scared she might fall out of the dress.

"You look amazing," Xander declared honestly, before turning slightly to Willow. "You are so lucky," he told her simply.

Both Tara and Willow smiled at the compliment, and then smiled at each other. As their eyes met, they walked into each other's arms and hugged. Xander watched them with a smile; he knew he could spontaneously combust without disturbing them. It was so obvious to anyone watching that those two were deeply in love.

Buffy glided down the stairs next - to Xander, this was almost appearing stage managed.

He simply couldn't take his eyes off her, as she appeared to float down the stairs. Despite his intentions not to let her rule his life, there was just too much history of him longing after her for Xander not to be affected by her.

His eyes started at the tips of her red high heels, slid up her delicate ankles and followed the curves of her legs up to her mid-thigh. From there, he took the next part of Buffy in a single look. A vibrant red dress held up by spaghetti straps covered her like a second skin. It slid smoothly over her body as she moved; giving the impression that she was not wearing anything underneath.

Xander slowly met Buffy's eyes. The admiration visible in his gaze warmed Buffy in a way nothing else could. She smiled at him, her own gaze as appreciative as she looked him over.

Blood that had been happily circulating through his body, was now being diverted into parts of him that he would rather remain hidden, at least while

he was in public.

Tara and Willow watched with interest; they could almost see the electricity sparking between their friends.

Xander's brain slowly pried away control from his hormones in a closely fought battle. He moved his head, breaking eye contact, and trying to regain his equilibrium.

Buffy smiled to herself. She had seen the desire in his eyes, now; it was just a case of getting him to act on it now.

<It's amazing what a bit of flesh and a skin tight dress can accomplish,> she thought to herself.

"Come on, Dawn. It's time to go," Buffy shouted up the stairs. The sound of a bedroom door banging open drew their attention to the top of the stairs, as Dawn bounded down the stairs and dived into Xander's arms, giving him a hug.

Xander's eyes widened considerably as he felt parts of Dawn's anatomy wiggle against his chest.

Dawn blushed as she molded herself against Xander. She could feel him, pressed against the top of her thigh. Not having been present when Buffy had walked downstairs, she believed it was in reaction to her clothing and her hug.

Xander felt trapped, not wanting to push Dawn away, in case she thought it was a personal rejection. He didn't also want to keep holding her, as it was obvious she wasn't wearing a bra, and her hip was pressed against a part of his body he never wanted her to feel. He looked at the others, his eyes silently pleading for help.

Buffy recovered first. "Dawn, what are you wearing?" she asked, in her best Mom voice.

Reluctantly, Dawn removed her hands from around Xander, breathing in his scent as she stepped back and turned to face Buffy. She took a step or two towards her sister, exaggerating the swing of her hips for Xander's benefit.

Xander tried very hard not to look at the incredibly tight leather clad buttocks swaying in front of him.

Dawn looked down at herself, "Pants and a top?" she asked, an innocent expression plastered on her face.

Before the argument could escalate, Xander looked at his watch. "We need to go if we're going to get to the restaurant on time," he warned.

Dawn flashed a triumphant look at her sister, who rolled her eyes.

Xander led the way to the car, Dawn following, walking carefully, as her pants did not leave much room for unimportant features, such as blood circulation. She shivered a little, not having gone outside bra-less since before she was a teenager. Her mind replayed the scene with Xander again and again as she walked to the car. Only in her mind, Xander's hug back had been a lot more enthusiastic, and the warmth against her hip had been a lot more prominent.

Buffy fumed as she walked behind her sister. She appreciated that she they had to leave now, but she was going to have a very long talk with her later. Dressing like a slut and jumping on \*her\* boyfriend had to be a ground-able offence, and if it wasn't already, she would make it one.

Behind Buffy, Willow and Tara locked the door. They shared a glance.

"Sibling rivalry?" Tara asked.

"Yep," Willow replied.

"Who do we help?"

"Tara!" Willow said, shocked, "What do you mean?"

"Who do we think is going to be best for Xander?" Tara asked patiently.

"But Dawn is only sixteen!"

"She won't be sixteen forever," the blonde reminded her lover. "She's growing up fast."

"I can't see Xander with Dawn yet, she needs to grow up a lot first, hell, and he does as well. I think Buffy has grown up over the last few weeks." Willow answered, humoring her.

Tara smiled, "I agree totally."

Willow looked at her, "I like bold Tara - she's fun."

Tara just laughed, as they hurried to the car.

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The drive to the restaurant was uncomfortable. Buffy and Dawn were glaring at each other, while Tara and Willow were trying hard not to laugh. Xander just drove silently, wondering what the hell was going on with Dawn. The tight red leather pants and the small t-shirt reminded him of the outfits Faith used to wear.



They arrived at the restaurant with ten minutes to spare.

As he parked the car in the lot adjacent to the restaurant, Tara leaned toward Xander and whispered. "Give me and Willow ten minutes to sort this out, Xan."

Xander nodded and got out the car. Buffy opened the door and got out, and Willow followed her.

As Dawn tried to exit the vehicle, Tara lightly touched her shoulder. "Wait a minute, please, sweetie?" she asked.

Dawn paused, and turned to face Tara.

"What?" she asked.

Tara patted the seat next to her, "Sit."

Dawn did, watching the amused smile on Tara's face warily.

"Trying out a new look, Dawn?" the blonde Wicca asked.

Dawn blushed slightly, as she answered. "Yes."

"Why?"

Dawn looked away, avoiding the question. "Might it have something to do with the good looking sweetie you pressed yourself against earlier?"

Dawn's face immediately went several shades brighter red.

"Maybe," she whispered under her breath.

"Do you want to explain what is going on, or do you want me to guess?" Tara asked.

She waited a second for Dawn's reply, and when none was forthcoming, she continued. "You're in love with Xander, and think that dressing like that will get his attention."

Dawn looked up at Tara, shocked. "How do you know that?"

"I did it myself once, when I was younger." Tara's smile turned a little sad, as she remembered her own youth. "It didn't work; she was straight and certainly not interested in someone so much younger than herself."

"Xander's not gay," Dawn protested, trying to counter Tara's points.

"I know, honey," Tara replied, "but he is a lot older than you."

"He said that if he was available, when I turned eighteen, I could have him."

"Is that exactly what he said, Dawn?" Tara asked, raising her eyebrows.

"No," Dawn admitted quietly.

"Xander loves you, Dawn. But not like that," Tara added gently, resting her hand on Dawn's knee.

"But he could!" Dawn exclaimed, trying to move from under Tara's touch.

"Possibly," Tara admitted. "If you were older, or his heart didn't belong to someone else."

"Buffy," Dawn spat. "What does he see in that drug taking, vampire laying skank?"

"Dawn!"

Dawn looked repentant. "Sorry, I didn't really mean that," she apologized. She paused for a second, then blurted out, "but Xander finds me attractive! When I hugged him, I, errr, felt him," she explained, emphasizing the 'him'.

"Ooo, Dawn" Tara sighed softly, knowing that she was about to break the younger girl's heart. "You didn't see Buffy and Xander a few minutes earlier. They had so much electricity between them; they could have replaced the Hoover dam. What you felt, was the remnants of that."

"Look Dawn," she elaborated. "You've got a choice here. You can fight for Xander, make him extremely uncomfortable that an underage girl is chasing him all the time, and at the same time annoy the hell out of your sister, and possibly ruin her best chance of happiness. Doing that, you *might* get Xander later, but it's more than likely that you'll drive him off. Or, you can help your sister, make her happy, and use it for emotional blackmail purposes for the next few years."

Dawn looked at Tara, tears slowly sliding down her face, as she struggled with a smile. "You really think I don't have a chance with Xander?"

"Not at the moment, sweetie. You're a beautiful girl, and if this was a few years in the future, I'd be telling you to go for it. But right now, the best

person for Xander is Buffy, and I think that is the best person for her. He's loved her so long, and she's finally seeing him the same way, now."

"You think I can get a car out of this?" Dawn asked, a sad smile still on her face.

Tara smiled, "it certainly wouldn't hurt to ask."

She opened her arms to Dawn, who fell into them, crying.

"It's ok, let it go, honey," Tara whispered softly, as she gently rubbed Dawn's back as the younger girl sobbed her heart out.

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Outside the car, Willow turned to Buffy.

"So, why are you mad?" Willow asked Buffy. "You've seen Dawn wear less than that before."

"What do you mean?"

"You've been glaring at her through the entire journey."

"She looks like Faith," Buffy said.

"Uh huh. And?" Willow said.

"She was pressing her boobs against my boyfriend, damn it."

"Your boyfriend?" Willow asked, saccharine curiosity in her voice.

"Well, maybe not officially, but eventually, yes."

"You've had Xander wanting you since you met, why now?"

"I don't understand."

"A week ago, you were fucking Spike," Willow said casually. She was stating a fact, not accusing Buffy. "Suddenly, Xander comes swooping to your rescue, again, and pulls you back out of that pit. And now you want him?"

Buffy just nodded.

"He's going to think the same thing I do. You're either rewarding him for saving you, or using him to keep in the light. Either way, you're not giving Xan what he deserves; a loving relationship between two equal adults."

Buffy flinched as Willow's words hit her.

Before Buffy could reply, Willow continued. "Tara and I love Xander. He's been the most important person in my life since I was six. Not only has he accepted my partner, he's bolstered her confidence in herself to such a degree that, tonight, she's wearing a dress that exposes more flesh than I've ever seen show in public. And she's wearing it because he asked her, jokingly, to dress up. Tara hasn't done anything like that for a boy since she was thirteen.

"I'm wearing this outfit for the same reason; we wanted Xander to not know what hit him tonight." Willow took a deep breath, before continuing. "Buffy, Xander's happiness is incredibly important to us. If you're not what he needs, we won't let you use him."

Buffy looked into Willow's famous resolve face. "You've never talked to me like that, before," she whispered to Willow, shocked.

"I know, but I'm not a shy, sixteen year old geek anymore, Buffy. I'm an adult in a loving, committed relationship. And a witch."

Buffy found herself staring into Willow's eyes; she couldn't look away, no matter how hard she tried. Willow's voice seemed to seep slowly through her, leaving her no room to turn.

"How do you feel about Xander?" The question could not be ignored.

"I've loved Xander as a friend for all these years," Buffy found herself saying. "He's always been here for me, despite what I put him through. I knew he loved me, and was reassured by it. I even counted on it, when I used it against him at the Bronze, at the beginning of junior year. But things have changed. I've changed. I don't look at him like that anymore. I look at him and want to tear his clothes off, and see which of us can exhaust the other first."

"Willow, I've finally noticed that Xander has grown up. I know it's happened late, almost too late. But I think I'm at a point now where I can give Xander everything I am. I don't just trust him with my life and my heart, I trust him with my soul." Buffy felt a tear slide down one cheek. "But what if he doesn't want me, doesn't trust me anymore?"

Willow smiled gently, pulling Buffy into her arms. As she lost eye contact, the spell broke.

She hugged her and whispered, "We're on your side now - we just had to be sure."

"You used a spell on me?" Buffy asked, shocked.

"A truth spell," Willow admitted. "I wanted to be sure."

Buffy frowned, and then nodded slowly.

"But what about Dawn?" she asked Willow.

"Tara should be taking care of that now." They turned to face the car, as the back door swung open and Dawn climbed out. She looked towards her sister.

Buffy smiled tentatively at her, and Dawn matched her smile. Seconds later, they were hugging each.

"You look good, for teenage jailbait." Buffy told Dawn with a big smile.

"You don't look so bad yourself, for someone over the hill," Dawn teased back.

With that, they walked to the restaurant entrance.

Tara looked at Willow quizzically.

Willow smiled. "Xander's not got a chance."

Xander was sat at the bar, nursing a bottle of coke. His smile lit up his face as he watched 'his' ladies enter together.

He shepherded them to their table, "Order what you like, tonight's the last night I can afford, so let's blow it in style," he said with a cheery grin.

The others smiled, and followed his command,

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After a quick patrol of a couple of the infamous Sunnydale cemeteries, they arrived at the Bronze.

Having discussed it earlier, the girls each took position alongside Xander, Willow and Tara in front, Buffy and Dawn flanking him.

The arrival of four beautiful girls, all dressed to the nines, caught everyone's attention.

Xander was the recipient of a large amount of envious stares, not all of them from men.

Tara and Willow stopped first. In the full view of the patrons, Tara walked up to Xander.

"You know, I wouldn't normally do this for anyone, but for saving Buffy, you deserve one fantasy," she smiled. "Not that one, Xan," she added a moment later.

Xander smiled, and nodded. "You look fantastic, Tara."

She smiled, and then, to Xander's surprise, leaned in and kissed him, hard on the lips. Xander's eyes shot open, as he instinctively opened his mouth. Tara kissed him deeper, then released him and strolled away, leaving Xander standing unsteadily.

Before Xander could recover, Willow took Tara's place. She moved her hands up, gently touching his face, looking in his eyes.

"I love you, Xander, I always have," she whispered softly, and then followed her lover in kissing him. Having almost expected this, Xander gently kissed her back, a kiss of love and family, not one of passion.

"I love you, too. You'll always be my Will. Look after Tara and she'll stick by you for life."

Willow grinned, and with her head held high, she followed her partner to a table.

Dawn moved to Xander next. She smiled up at him, "I'm sorry about earlier, Xan."

He smiled back, "There are worse things in life, Dawn, than to be hugged by a beautiful woman."

She lent up, and kissed him gently on the corner of his mouth, before swirling and walking away from him. He watched her go with a smile, sensing the slight sadness she carried as she let him go.

That just left Buffy. She took a step closer to him. She smiled, and simply said, "Thank you," before leaning in and kissing him. She too turned, and walked to their table.

It took Xander a few seconds to remove the stunned smile from his face. As he walked over the dance floor to join them, he couldn't help but strut.

At the table, Willow and Tara looked at each other, and then laughed loudly. Xander's fantasy fulfilled, they reverted to their normal behavior for the rest of the evening, teasing, laughing and joking.

Tara stood. "My turn for drinks. Give me a hand carrying them, Buffy, Dawn?" she asked. Buffy and Dawn nodded and joined Tara, threading their way through the floor.

Willow turned to Xander, "You do know Buffy's in love with you, don't you?" she asked.

"What!" Xander exclaimed.

"Buffy: short girl, bottle blonde, good in a fight?"

Xander rolled his eyes at Willow.

"She's in love with you," Willow repeated.

"No, she's not," Xander said firmly. "She might feel something, but it's just gratitude."

Willow shook her head and smirked. "Not according to the truth spell I put her under earlier," she disagreed.

Xander blinked. "You put Buffy under a truth spell?" he asked, shock evident in his voice.

Willow nodded, and looked innocent.

Xander sat back in his chair. Considering her revelation, "I think I could be in love with her as well," he admitted. "But every time I think of her like that, I can't get the image of Spike's naked press-ups out of my head."

Willow had a questioning look on her face. Xander sighed, "Buffy was invisible at the time."

Willow froze for a moment, processing that piece of information. As everything clicked into place, she growled. Her eyes slowly turned black as she turned, searching for Buffy.

Seeing her at the bar, she started to chant under her breath, only to stop as Xander's hand clamped on her arm and halted her gestures in mid-movement.

She turned, her eyes still flashing.

"Calm down, Willow." Xander told her firmly, looking her directly in the eyes. "You don't have any right to be upset, regardless of what, or who, she was doing."

They stared at each other for a second, before Willow's eyes slowly turned back to normal.

She smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, but that was a really bad thing for her to do."

Xander nodded, "I won't disagree with you. Now do you see my problem?"

Willow shifted slightly in her seat. "You can't forget what she did?" Willow half asked, half stated.

"Every time I look at her, I see Spike's smug grin as he looked up at me. I can't move past it."



# Like a Cat in a Bag

## Part 7

Willow sat at the table, idly watching the dancing denizens of the night club and Xander was dancing with Dawn.

Well, Dawn was dancing; Xander was flailing his limbs in what looked like an eastern European fertility dance. The younger girl didn't seem to be minding too much though, judging by the way she was laughing.

Xander was getting a lot of attention for the first time, and he loved it. Their spectacular entrance earlier had caused a small stir, and he knew he had a lot of girls very curious to know what he had done to deserve such a display. Still, 'his' girls were extremely possessive, and no matter which one was dancing with him, they made sure to post virtual 'hands off' signs all over him.

The brunet had to admit, he was secretly pleased with this. While it was fun to try and dance his troubles away, the events of the last week still weighed heavily on his mind.

He really had to try and sort out his emotions regarding the Slayer. Now that she was out of the woods, physically at least, he needed time to go through the jumble of feelings he was currently experiencing.

Did he still love Buffy? Had he ever loved Buffy? Until recently, Buffy represented his hopes and his dreams. She was beautiful, sharp, witty, funny, a great fighter, and his not-so-secret hero.

In his mind, she was perfect, and he felt that he was perfect for her. There was something reassuring, actually, in the way she never looked back at him like that. He could worship her from afar, always hoping, and never expecting to get her.

Now, though, things had changed.

She had fallen from the small pedestal he had placed her on, fallen in a way he could never have anticipated. He always felt that he understood her problems, that he knew what she faced day in, day out.

He had forgiven her for the whole Angel charade – the way she had lied when he had returned – just as he had forgiven her time and time again for everything else.

Now, however, forgiveness was something he wasn't sure he could give.

It wasn't that he thought that he was perfect, but he wasn't the one who had been using drugs recently, or in a lot of cases, needed his forgiveness.

He tried to forget about it, and concentrated on calming his dancing down a little.

It wasn't working; even Dawn could see that he was distracted.

"Want to talk about it?" she asked, trying to be mature. It was a difficult thing to accomplish, when you were dancing in a night club with raucous music blaring.

Xander smiled a little sadly and shook his head. "There are some things in life, Dawn, that you can't accept. What happened was one of those things."

"Why can't you accept it?" she asked, grabbing his hand and leading him to the bar.

"Two cokes," Xander said to the barman, pulling out his wallet. He turned back and focused on the young girl before him. "It's the lack of respect involved, Dawn. But let's talk about something else."

"Like what?" she asked, with a smile.

He paused, and took a drink of the watered down coke he had just overpaid for. "The rip off prices I just paid?" he replied with a grin.

"Are you really going to be broke from all of this?" she asked suddenly.

"Nah, it just means I delay looking for a new apartment for a month, nothing serious."

"So, why aren't you living with us?"

Xander shrugged. "It never really came up."

Dawn reached out and grabbed his hand, pausing only to finish her drink, before she dragged him over to the other girls.

"Sit," she ordered imperiously.

Xander raised an eyebrow, and then smirked at her.

"Business runs in the family, eh?"

"Willow," Buffy said from across the table, "would you be as kind as to elbow him for me?"

Willow nodded, although Xander noticed her eyes lacked the sparkle of earlier, and elbowed him gently.

“Oof,” Xander smirked, overacting deliberately.

“Xander was planning on moving apartments; now, he’s got to stay where he is because of the money he’s spent recently. So, he needs to move in with us,” Dawn explained. “Acting as though her logic was impeccable and indisputable, she sat back, a smug look on her face.

Willow frowned, and then turned and looked at Xander. “You know, it’s really not such a stupid idea. You’re over there most of the time anyway, and it would be fun with all of us living there for the summer.”

“Wouldn’t it be a little cramped?” Xander asked. He wasn’t sure that he wanted to be in that close proximity to Buffy.

“Not at all,” Buffy blurted. “You can have Mum’s old room.”

“Besides, Xander” Tara added quietly. “if you’re planning on sending Buffy back to school, it would really help if you could pay some of the bills on a more permanent basis.”

Xander nodded slowly. He hadn’t thought about that; with Buffy out of a job, and going back to school, someone was going to have to pay the mortgage, and while he had been prepared to pay it and pay his rent, having to pay just the one of them would leave a lot more spare money for having fun.

He smiled crookedly, “Okay. I’ll cancel my lease tomorrow, I only have to give a week’s notice – comes from living in what only cockroaches would call a pleasant habitat.

His decision was rewarded by four beaming smiles.

“Right,” Willow said. “You,” she pointed at Xander, “dance floor.

“You,” she pointed at Tara, “are a genius and I love you.” She kissed the girl quickly, and then followed Xander out onto the dance floor. She smiled as the music slowed, and pulled Xander close so that they could talk in private.

“I’ve calmed down a bit now,” she whispered.

“I can tell,” he whispered back. “Buffy’s still got her ears.”

Willow giggled and lightly punched him. “I was thinking of seeing if I could help you two.”

“Oh?” Xander asked, spinning her around in what was almost a graceful move for him.

“Yeah. I know this spell that will let you both experience what the other went through. It will allow you to see each others point of view,” she elaborated with a wide smile.

Xander froze on the dance floor, and then sighed. It looked like he’d missed something else, and he sure as hell *wasn’t* going to go through this past week again.

“Come with me,” he said and grabbed her hand tightly, pulling her to the exit.

“What are you doing?” Willow asked, pulling against him.

“We need to talk,” he growled.

---

“Uhhh, what’s happening out there?” Dawn asked, watching as Xander froze in the middle of a slow dance.

They watched as Xander grabbed the small red haired girl’s hand, and dragged her off the dance floor.

“Stand in front of me,” Tara whispered, reaching into her purse. As the two girls moved to hide her from sight, she quickly murmured a spell, burning some incense. A moment later, she closed her eyes and collapsed back into the chair.

“You can sit down again,” she whispered. “Willow was upset about something; I don’t know what, I couldn’t quite pick it up. Whatever it was, she offered to help fix it – by letting Xander switch memories with someone so that they could see what each other was thinking. Xander felt depressed and got a little scared at the offer; he thinks Willow is getting addicted to magic and he’s going to do something about it.”

“What are you going to do?” Dawn asked, not noticing that Buffy had gone pale next to her.

“Whatever he wants,” Tara said simply.

“Huh?”

“I’ve been worried about it, too,” Tara confessed in a small voice. “But Willow wouldn’t admit there was a problem, and I didn’t want to push it, you know? I didn’t want to face it incase it came down to a choice; me or magic.”

A solitary tear slowly crawled down her cheek. “He’s taking my risk for me, and he’ll be able to get through to her where I couldn’t. So whatever he

wants – he’s giving me my life.”

“It’s my fault,” Buffy said.

“What is?” Tara asked gently.

“That spell Willow wanted to cast the spell. It was for me. I did something that I’m ashamed off, and I don’t know how to fix it with him.”

“What?” Dawn groaned. “It can’t be worse than being on drugs.”

“When I was invisible, Xander came by Spike’s crypt. Spike told him he was doing naked push ups.”

“Huh?” Dawn asked, looking around, a look of confusion on her face.

Tara felt the blood leave her face at an alarming rate, and grabbed the table. “He knows?”

“Spike told him, and I confessed.”

“Wait a second; you did the nasty with Spike in front of Xander?” Dawn blurted out.

Buffy blushed bright red.

“Jeez, Buff! When you screw things up you don’t do it by half, do you?”

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“How many spells have you cast today?” Xander demanded.

“What?”

“Spells, Willow. Magic. You know, that thing you pray to your goddess for.”

“I know what magic is,” Willow retorted, looking irritated at his questions. “And I don’t know. A couple.”

“Count,” Xander snarled.

“Look, I don’t know what your problem is, Xander, but I don’t appreciate how you’re acting.”

“Answer the bloody question,” Xander yelled. They were sitting inside his SUV, so that they could have the fight he knew they were about to have, in private.

“I don’t know - five, six maybe?”

“Great,” Xander groaned. “What were they?”

“Well, I changed the TV channel, made some coffee, fixed a light bulb, stopped Ms Kitty from tearing up the couch, and then cast the truth spell on Buffy.”

“My god. What the hell are you thinking?”

“What?”

“You’re as bloody addicted as Buffy was.”

“What? To magic? Don’t be stupid!”

“Oh, please! How does magic make you feel, Wills? Give you a rush to be better than someone else? To be able to do something without getting off your ass? Makes you excited when you pull a spell off, when you levitate something?”

“No.”

“Don’t lie to me, Willow Rosenberg, you’re not very good at it.”

“But Xander,” Willow whined, suddenly looking at him with her eyes wide open.

“That didn’t work for Buffy, and it’s not going to work for you,” Xander snorted. “You’ve got a problem.”

“No, I haven’t. I can handle it. Magic’s fun, nothing else.”

“Nothing’s just fun, Willow. Not when you’re doing something like that for no real reason<” he retorted.

“Look at your first reaction to hearing about Buffy; you want to fry her, and just now, you wanted to cast some weird mojo so that we were in each others minds? Damn it, Willow, we’re not puppets for you to play with!”

The red haired witch burst into tears.



“That’s not going to work either, Willow. This past week, I’ve been cried on, spat on, covered in soup, porridge, and even vomit.”

“But…”

“There are no buts,” he said harshly. “What do you think is going to happen? Sooner or later something will happen and you’ll cast a spell on one of us. After all, why not? It’s easy for you and it’s only fun, right?”

“I wouldn’t cast a spell on any of you!”

“You already bloody have – you cast a truth spell on Buffy earlier.”

Willow went white.

“You invaded her mind; you forced her into admitting something she didn’t want to admit. Where the hell is the right in that?”

“I did it for you,” Willow said in a tiny voice.

“Did I ask you to?”

“No.”

Xander took a deep breath and tried to calm down. “Don’t you get it, even after this week?”

“Get what?”

“That I’m an adult, or bloody close to it now. I’ve got a job, my own place, my own car, a Playstation, pretty much everything I want.

“Yes, I can’t get past what Buffy did at the moment, but you know what? That’s life. It’s something I have to deal with. Either I do, or I don’t, but either way it’s my decision, my life. If I do deal, then either Buffy and I get together, or we don’t. It’s our lives, our decision.”

“But…”

Xander turned in the driver seat, reached out, and lightly touched her chin.

“I see my Willow in there,” he said softly. “But I see something else – the same thing that I saw in Buffy’s eyes. You’ve got to face it Wills, because if you don’t, you lose Tara. You lose Buffy. You lose Dawn. You lose me. You will be alone, and all you will have is your power, your magic. Even if you cast spells on us, it won’t be us, it’ll just be empty shells, blank slates that you can write what ever you want on. And your creative writing has never been that good.

“Can you face that? Can you face eternity with no one to love you, with no one to laugh with you? When you turn over at night, all you’ll have is an illusion of when you were happy?”

Willow’s mouth opened and shut several times, but no words emerged.

“Tell me I’m wrong, Willow. Tell me I’m exaggerating. Tell me I’m mistaken, that I’m being an idiot like I have in the past. I’ll believe you. Just say the words, and this conversation never happened. Tell me the truth, Wills.”

“I… I…” Willow’s chest heaved. “I can’t,” she yelled, and burst into tears again. “I don’t know why I do it, but I do. It feels good, and it’s easy. I like it, and I can’t give it up.”

“I don’t want you to give it up,” Xander whispered, pulling her across onto his lap and cuddling her like he would a little girl. “I want you to use it, but only when it’s important.

“It’s like alcohol. I can have a drink, you know? And I’m not my dad. I don’t come home pissed out of my skull and shout abuse at the postman. But if every time something went wrong, I had a drink, it wouldn’t be long before I didn’t have anything but the drink, and pretty soon, I’m in a gutter being used as a toilet by other winos.”

Willow hiccupped a small laugh. “Thanks for the mental image, Xan. It’s gonna take years of therapy to get that out of my head.”

“We’ll deal with this,” he said softly, stroking her hair. “Tara will help.”

“Oh god! Tara,” Willow cried. “What is she going to think of me?”

“That you had a small problem, and that you’re dealing with it before it becomes a serious issue?”

Willow sniffled and rubbed her face into Xander’s shirt.

“Oh great,” he sighed, amused. “Now I can add snot to that list.”

“Xander!” Willow laughed, and hit him in the stomach.

“So, are you going to repair your makeup? You look like a raccoon.”

Willow hit him again, and moved her hand up to her eyes, then stopped, a horrified expression on her face.

"We'll deal, Wills, I promise."

She nodded, and reached over to her purse, pulling some makeup and a mirror out. It didn't take her long to repair the damage.

"Come on," she smiled, opening the door and sliding out.

"You ready to face them?"

Willow put her resolve face on. "I owe both Buffy and Tara an apology."

Xander nodded. "Let's go then."

They walked back in to the nightclub, her arm linked through his, and he fervently hoped that this was the last emergency to hit, tonight. He was exhausted now, too much had happened over the last week.

They walked up to the table, and Willow grabbed Tara, pulling her onto the dance floor, as Xander collapsed into the booth and watched the two of them.

He smiled as Willow said something seriously, and Tara smiled massively, and pulled Willow in close, so that they could dance.

"That's a relieved look," Buffy said quietly.

"Look at Willow's feet."

"They're on the ground?"

"Exactly."

"Well," Dawn said, standing up. "I'm going to interrupt the happy couple and dance with them. You two are going to talk. And remember, if you two don't get together, I get a shot at Xander." She grinned impishly, and danced off, over to the other two girls.

"Subtle, she isn't," Xander smiled.

"You talked to Willow?"

Xander nodded.

"Same as to me?"

"A little more bluntness, a little less vomit."

Buffy laughed, just a little uncomfortably.

"Would it help if I said I was sorry?"

Xander sighed and swung his feet up onto the nearest cheer. "Up here, yes" he said, pointing to his head, "I know it wasn't you fault."

"But?" Buffy prompted.

"But it doesn't matter," Xander said softly. "I won't let him have the last laugh. I realized when I was talking to Willow that he told me that to hurt me – and it did. I won't let him have any more influence over me."

"So we can date?" Buffy said, sounding hopeful.

Xander shook his head slowly. "Maybe. But not right now."

"Why not?"

Xander sat up and turned to face her; as he reached up and lightly touched her cheek.

"Because I don't know who Buffy Summers is at the moment, and I don't think you do either," he said as gently as he could. "You can't define yourself around the people you are in love with; you have to be yourself, first."

"Don't you want me?"

"More than you will ever know," Xander replied simply, unable to believe he was actually doing this. "But I want everything. I want the girl I skateboarded into a rail for, I want the girl whose hair caught the sun and made me want to worship her. I want the girl with the smile that can light up a room. I want Buffy, all of Buffy, and I can't have that, till you've got it inside to offer me."

He stood, and bent down to lightly brush his lips against her soft cheek. "I'll wait for you guys in the car – take as long as you need."

Slowly, he turned and walked away, through the crowded dance floor, in to the night. For the first time in a week, he looked up at the night sky, and smiled.

“Willow! Tara!” Buffy yelled.

“What?” Willow shouted, rushing into the living room in the house on Revello Drive.

“Look!” Buffy said, jumping around like a four year old waiting for her birthday gifts

“What is it?” Tara asked, as she walked in.

“My grades,” Buffy said as she practically bounced off the walls.

Willow looked at them, and smiled, “Two C’s, a B, and an A! I’m so proud of you!”

“I got an A, I got an A,” Buffy sang, as she danced around the room.

“Okay, who gave her sugar?” Dawn asked dryly, entering from the kitchen.

“No one,” Buffy said, picking her sister up and swirling her around merrily.

“Oi,” Dawn laughed. “Slayer strength, Buff, remember!”

“Oh hush,” she said as she put her sister down. “Okay,” she smiled. “I need you three out the house for the evening.”

“You do?” Willow asked.

“Yep. I’ve been waiting for Xander for the past six months, and I’m not waiting any more,” she declared.

“I’ve been to college; I’ve talked to the counselor; and while I had to hide half of it, I could talk about the abandonment issues; I’ve worked hard at studying for the first time ever, I’ve turned down every cute boy that’s asked me out, not because of Xander, but because of what he said.

“I am Buffy Summers, and I am not waiting a second longer to getting me some Xander!”

Willow laughed and turned into Tara’s arms. “Think we could spring for a hotel tonight, hon?”

“You’re already booked,” Buffy informed, holding out a piece of paper. “Directions, reservations, everything.”

“What about me?” Dawn asked.

“You too. You’re in the room next to them. Oh, and all three of you are on patrol tonight.”

“I dunno,” Tara teased. “First she throws us out, and then she asks us for a favor?”

“I got an A,” Buffy pouted. “I deserve a reward.”

“Okay,” Tara relented. “When do you want us out the way?”

Buffy looked at her watch and grinned. “Now?”

“Now!?”

“Well, Xander’s due home in thirty minutes, and I need to shower and do girly stuff. So, you need to be gone before he gets home.”

Tara and Willow nodded, and walked out together.

“So it’s really it?” Dawn asked softly.

Buffy walked over to her sister and nodded. “I’m sorry.”

Dawn smiled crookedly. “You know if he still says ‘no’, I’m still going to try for him.”

Buffy nodded softly, and reached out and stroked her sister’s hair back.

“If I don’t succeed, you will. You’ve got the Summers’ good looks.” She pulled Dawn into a hug.

“He’s not going to say no,” Dawn whispered.

“I know.”

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Xander sat at the traffic lights, loud rock music playing from his car stereo, and grinned to himself. He knew Buffy was getting her grades today, and was planning on taking everyone out for dinner if she’d done well. He was pretty sure she had. Slaying was a part of her life, a part of all their

lives, actually, but it was no longer the one dominating feature.

He pulled to a smooth stop outside their home, and whistled to himself as he climbed out the car and walked up the driveway.

"Buffy?" Xander called, not seeing her in the living room. He walked through into the kitchen, and was suddenly hit by a sense of déjà vu, as he heard a thump from upstairs.

Not wanting to take any chances, he grabbed a knife and crept upstairs, his whistling abandoned. He wasn't sure if the noise was Buffy, or a burglar, and wasn't going to take any chances.

He crept along the hallway, and placed his hand on the door to Buffy room, praying that he wouldn't find what he was dreading.

"Xander."

Xander's voice failed him, as he looked at her, his mind unable to comprehend what he was seeing. His mouth dropped open in shock. "Oh my god," was all he managed to get out, before slumping against the wall.

Buffy smiled. "You're allowed to look," she whispered.

Xander shook himself, trying to regain control of his mental faculties.

"Look," Buffy purred, running her hands up her sides. "You can't see my ribs any more."

Xander nodded numbly, having a hard time looking at anything as unimportant as ribs.

"And my boobs are bigger as well," Buffy continued with a smirk.

He nodded in agreement, again.

Buffy stood from her kneeling position and turned around. "I've even got an ass again."

"A perfect ass," Xander agreed, breathing heavily.

"Thank you," Buffy beamed. She turned to face him again, and he couldn't stop his eyes from running up and down her body. He couldn't see any evidence of the drug use, all he saw was healthy muscle tone, and acres of gorgeous skin that he wanted to explore at his leisure.

"My name is Buffy Summers," Buffy said quietly, walking over to him. "I'm a college student who, with the help of some incredible people, saves the world at night. I've got a wonderful sister, and two female friends who are as close as sisters. I've been single for six months, and haven't felt any loss because of it. I even got an A in one of my classes, because I studied for it."

She stretched, causing her breasts to move before his eyes, and he couldn't help groaning. A feminine look of satisfaction appeared on her face, and she moved closer, and then dropped to her knees in front of him.

"What seems like a lifetime ago, I made you an offer out of desperation," she said, as she looked up, slowly licking her lips.

Xander felt his mouth go dry.

"I can't keep that offer open," she said softly. "I won't sell myself for anything or anyone. Not even you."

He opened his mouth, but shut it again when she reached up and pressed her finger to her lips. "I know you would never ask," she continued softly. "So I have a new deal for you. You give me your heart, your mind, your body, and your soul, and I'll give you the same."

Xander reached down, lifting her up by the elbows.

A faint look of apprehension appeared in her eyes, as she waited for his answer.

"This is where we kiss," he whispered.

Buffy blinked, and then smiled radiantly at him.

"There's the smile," he whispered, his hand touching her face.

"I'll be smiling it a lot around you," she whispered.

"I'm going to want a long time," Xander warned.

"Forever?"

"Sounds good to me," Xander agreed, as he leant down and slowly touched his lips to hers. He felt Buffy reach up, and wrap her arms around his neck, and he realised he had a very naked Buffy in his arms.

She broke the kiss, but didn't move back. "So, you do find me attractive now?"

He moved his hips slightly, and she laughed. "You know," she said softly. "You did have one good idea that day."

“Oh?” Xander asked, stroking his hands up and down the golden skin of her back, marvelling at how soft and warm she felt.

“I’ve never been blindfolded before,” she whispered. “It could be fun.”

Xander laughed softly, “That can come later. Right now, I just want to explore every inch of you.”

Buffy smiled and took a step back, twirling on the spot unselfconsciously. “You can explore any where you like Xan, but there is one problem.”

“What?”

“You’re wearing way too many clothes.”

“What about the girls?”

“Out of the way, all night.”

“Thank god,” Xander whispered.

“No, thank Buffy,” she smirked.

Xander moved forwards, and lifted the smaller girl, throwing her on to the bed. He stripped out of his clothes as fast as he could.

“I intend to,” he growled, licked his lips, and joined her on the bed, prepared to fulfil many years of fantasies.