

Into The Night by Xanthe

<http://www.xanthe.org/into-the-night/>

Story Notes:

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I was clearing out my CD collection the other day, and came across a certain CD of haunting music that I hadn't listened to in awhile, and that got me thinking, and before I knew it, I'd written this. It's strange. It's different. Just go with it. J

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I never know when to expect him. After ten years, you'd think I'd be used to the way he takes off for months on end, disappearing to investigate the bizarre, and unusual, but I never do. When he's gone, I worry about him, and when he returns, it's always a surprise. Maybe because I never truly expect him to come back. Maybe because, at the back of my mind, I know that what he does is too dangerous, and that one day his curiosity will kill him, like the proverbial cat. He throws himself into each investigation so enthusiastically, greeting each new day as an adventure to be explored, full of new experiences to be savoured. Whenever I've wanted to ask him to stop, and stay with me awhile, I've held back, knowing that to do so would be to ask that he stop being him, and I'd never do that.

He's been gone for six months, and while my life goes on, there's always a part of me missing when he's not here. I don't think about him very often during the day, but in the evenings, as I sit on my balcony, drinking a glass of brandy, and watching the world go by below, my thoughts invariably return to him. So many cars, so many people going about their lives, and me, sitting here, watching, and waiting; and content to do so.

Six months – it's a long time, but with him, it makes no difference. When he returns, it's as if he's never been away. I've stayed late to finish some work without the endless interruptions of phones, and people, and I'm sitting at my desk, in my office, when there's a knock at the door. I glance up, irritated, but my bad mood evaporates as I see his face. He pokes his head around the door, and smiles.

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"Working late again, Walter? I thought I'd find you here." His thick dark hair is thinner than when I first knew him, and there are streaks of grey at the temples.

"You're back." All I can do is stare at him.

"Like the proverbial bad penny." He smiles, that innocent smile, and holds out his hands away from his body in a gesture of self-deprecation. "And not a moment too soon, I think. The weather is changing outside, Walter." He looks at me keenly, and, as always, I know that his words have a meaning beyond the obvious. He's come back for a reason. He always does. Sometimes that reason is me, but not always.

“Yes. I think so.” I stand up, and just gaze at him. He looks good – a little thinner than when I last saw him, but his eyes still have that unique blend of good humour, and otherworldly knowledge.

“It’s colder,” he says. “With the promise of un-seasonal snow.”

“Yes.” I don’t know how he knows, or even what he knows, but he’s right. “You’re hungry?” I ask, and he smiles at me, then laughs out loud. He’s rarely hungry, but he’s always ready to eat. He’s a man who enjoys good food.

“Walter, I do believe you’re trying to tempt me,” he says, “and as always, the promise of Gina’s fine home cooking is a lure. How is Gina?”

“Still pining for you. She asks when you’re coming back every time I go to the restaurant.” I pull a face, and he smiles, delighted to hear about old friends. Gina is in love with him, just as everyone is in love with him. He’s hard not to love.

“I can’t wait to see her again. Can we go straight there?”

“Of course. I want to hear all your news.” I pull on my coat, and I’m about to pass him, on my way to the door, when he stops me, laying a hand on my arm.

“Walter, before we step outside into the cold, there is one thing I missed more than Gina’s fine cooking.” His eyes are so warm as he looks deep into my soul. I don’t know what he sees inside me, but I do know he sees something. He always sees beyond the obvious. He always knows what isn’t spoken. It’s a gift, and a unique one. I have no idea why he comes back, knowing me as he does, knowing all the darkness, and anger inside me, yet he always does, and I’m profoundly grateful for that.

“You’re a good man, Walter,” he murmurs, as if reading my thoughts. Then he raises his hand, and gently strokes my cheek. It isn’t a gesture I would tolerate from any other man, but it brings a lump to my throat, and I smile, hesitantly, and his smile in response is warm, and caresses me, like the sun. He leans forward, and brushes my lips gently with his own. It’s a soft, tender kiss: a kiss of old friends and lovers, which is what we are, much to my own astonishment. I never loved a man before him, not in this way, and I’ve never loved another man since, either. He’s one of a kind. If you’d told me before I knew him that I’d one day sleep with a man, I’d have at best walked away in disgust, and at worst raised a fist against you. He is different though, in a way that is hard to describe.

There hasn’t been anyone else for me since I found him. I am lonely, but I am also content. He is a different matter. I don’t ask who else there is for him. I know there are people, women as well as men, and I know that, like me, they don’t resent sharing him. He isn’t one of us, you see. He’s special. Sometimes I wonder if he’s even human. Maybe he’s a changeling, an alien in human form, sent among us to show us a different path. He has an otherworldly charm, an innocence and naivety, which he retains even after all he’s seen. He doesn’t belong to me. He doesn’t even belong to this world. He is an eternal stranger, and

we are all the better for having welcomed him among us.

We dine at Gina's, where he is treated like royalty. Gina fusses over him, as women generally tend to, and then leaves us in peace while we eat our main course. She returns with dessert though – a huge pie with her trademark rich pastry, and fruit filling. He takes a bite, and savours it, visibly, as if it is the food of the gods, and then turns to her with a smile that says everything, and she laughs delightedly, and claps her hands, mesmerised by his performance, as we all are. I watch him eat though, and while he takes little bites, with the relish of a gourmand, he rarely accepts second helpings, preferring to enjoy what he has, never greedy. He is like this with life. He does not rush it, and swallow it half-chewed. He goes slowly, taking time to know all that is here, and all that is on offer, to find the best in everything, and everyone, however hard that is.

I almost lost him once. Out in the woods on a case he still rarely talks about. I don't know exactly what happened to this day – he disappeared, and then he returned, and he was subtly altered. The nightmares began around that time, and he has them still. You would never know, to look at him, that he had any worries in the world, but the troubled nights belie that calm exterior. We finish our meal, talking quietly over coffee, and he sees all that I would wish to hide.

"There is trouble here, Walter," he says, softly, placing one hand over mine.

"Yes, there is, but let's not talk about it. We might not have long, and I don't want to waste it," I reply. My problems, worries, and concerns are my own. I don't want to burden him. I know I'll tell him before he leaves, and I worry that this time, he'll find me wanting, but that isn't why I delay talking about it. We have so little time together, and I know he comes to me for respite. I don't want him to have to start worrying about my problems before we've had a chance to enjoy being together again. I never ask him how long he'll stay. Sometimes it's a day, or it can be a week, or, more rarely, a month or more. It is always just the right length of time, however long it is. If it were the rest of his life then that, also, would be just right.

"Tell me what has been happening to you," I ask him. "Your life is more interesting than mine. All I have to tell is a litany of late nights working at the office. You see more of the world." He would see more of the world just sitting in a room. That's his nature. He sees what the rest of us do not. He smiles, gently, and stirs his coffee, looking into the dark liquid as if it, also, holds some fascination for him. I've never known a man enjoy a simple cup of coffee more.

"Well, I'll be submitting my usual report," he tells me, a twinkle in his eyes, and I grunt by way of reply. Sometimes I forget that he does, nominally at least, still work for the Bureau, and that in his capacity as roving Special Agent, he is, officially, assigned to me. It's easy to forget that because the usual rules have never applied to him. Even the Director agrees that he is a special case, so he is allowed to do what he does best, and submit back the occasional report. They always make the most wonderful reading – better than any novel, and full of his unusual insights. He keeps a daily log, so that nothing is forgotten, and the resulting reports are therefore enormously long, and endlessly fascinating.

“I’ve been staying with my native American friends,” he tells me, his eyes shining. “They are aware of changes that the rest of the world does not see, old friend.” His tone is soft, and dreamy. He has always had an affinity with native American culture – their fate, and his, are indelibly entwined I think.

“What is it they see?” I watch him talk, drinking in his words, and expressions, savouring the familiar sound of his voice. Whenever he returns, it is as if he has never been away. With him, there is no awkwardness. He is always exactly as he ever was. He never changes despite all he has seen, and all that has happened to him.

“A cold wind is brewing that may sweep us all away,” he tells me, and if it were anyone but him talking like this, I would laugh out loud, but his words send a chill down my spine, and I nod.

“I know that something will happen soon. Even here, in the city, I can sense the tangled threads of some larger event drawing together, and reaching a conclusion.”

“Not a conclusion, no,” he muses. “Rather a new beginning. There are signs of hope too – how we acquit ourselves in the next few years will have great bearing on the eventual outcome. I do not believe evil will conquer this world. I cannot believe it, Walter.” He is silent, musing for a moment, for he, of all people, understands evil. It took him once, and used him for its own ends, and he has never forgotten. How could he? It still haunts his dreams. He gazes absently into space, then comes to with a start, and looks straight at me.

“Let’s go home, Walter,” he says, and there is an urgency to his tone that warms my heart.

Home. My home is his, whenever he is in Washington. I do not know if he calls any other place home, and I never ask. Whatever I have is his, including my own life. He travels light, and I don’t think he cares much about possessions. An honorary tribesman, he carries only what he needs, and his needs are few enough.

We return to my apartment, and he closes the door behind us with a look of intent in those expressive eyes. I know I cannot go to bed with this man without telling him that I am changed, irrevocably altered since he last saw me. He might not want me now, after what I have done, and what I am become. I turn to say something, to tell him about the darkness inside myself, and he surprises me by placing his lips on mine, and gently taking my worries from me, along with my words.

“Not now, Walter,” he says firmly, when our lips part.

“You should know. There is something I must...” I begin, and his eyes meet mine, and he shakes his head.

“I know, but not now.”

His hands pull me close, running along my back, spidering over my body with a longing, and

need, that I am powerless to resist, even if I wanted to. He is, in his lovemaking, as committed and focussed as he is in the way he lives his life. With him, there are no doubts and uncertainties – you know what you are, and what you mean to him. I surrender to his firm, loving embrace, and kiss him back with all my heart. I wish I had the words to convey to him the place he holds in my life, in my heart, in my soul, but words were never my gift, as they are his. All I have is the truth I hold inside, and, luckily for me, it is a truth he seems to be able to read as if it were written clearly on a page. He draws back, and without a word, holds out his hand, and I take it, and follow him to the bedroom. It's my bedroom, where I sleep, alone, every night, but he transforms it. Tonight it is his, and he is offering me its sanctuary.

He makes love to me the same way he ate that pie back at Gina's restaurant – small bites, lovingly savoured, and appreciated beyond measure. With him, I never feel less than completely loved, and needed. I sometimes wonder if he makes love to the others in this way, as if each of us is the focus of his world. All the normal laws of love, and relationships, are suspended with this man. To ask him to be mine alone would be to misunderstand his nature. He belongs to all of us, in some way, and I would not wish to trap him in my small corner of the world for my own sake. He would be miserable, and the world would be the poorer for my selfishness. Maybe I am wrong, and there is nobody else for him now. Maybe there is only me, but I do not think so. I do not know, and I will never ask.

His kisses burn fiery trails along my body, his tongue clashes with my own, and his hands are gentle, and loving on my flesh. He brings me a pleasure I have never known with any other partner. I would never have imagined that I would ever allow any man into my body, but I do, each time he takes me to his bed.

"Walter, will you allow me?" He asks politely. "Will it be all right?" He always says it, each time, although there is never any need to ask. It is always all right, and I will always allow it. I nod, and he carefully enters his flesh deep into my body, and I welcome him in. He has all of me, and he knows it, and I would trust him to the end of time. It never ceases to amaze me how much pleasure he takes in my body, and how much pleasure he wants to bestow upon it. He takes such care to bring me to the height of my senses, and beyond, and I know he enjoys touching me, embracing me, and exploring me in ways no other lover has ever done.

We are neither of us as young as we were, and when our bodies grow tired, we stop at last, but stay connected, touching, our lips sometimes bestowing a little kiss on weary flesh as we doze, contentedly, in each other's arms. His body is pale against my own, but still, even after all this time, he is as lithe, and fit as when I first made love to him. I touch his thick dark hair, and lay a kiss on the silver strands that frame his temples.

"We're getting old," I comment, and he smiles.

"Not too old though," he replies, curling up against my chest. "Never too old for this, Walter."

"I never knew...when I first met you, that we'd end up like this," I muse, and he chuckles.

"I did," he replies, kissing my throat. "I knew the minute we first met in your office. I saw us curled up like this, growing old like this." He smiles.

"I just saw the agent with the strange reputation. Highly thought of, with a talent for solving the most bizarre cases." I smile back at him, and kiss his nose. I'm not surprised that when we first met he somehow saw what we would become. If I'm honest, I knew there was something different about him back then too, although I had no idea what. Falling into bed with another man wasn't part of my world-view, and besides, I was married.

"I still don't know why you chose me," I murmur, my hands sliding over his back.

"I didn't choose you," he mutters sleepily, almost reproachfully. "I fell in love with you, and I count myself a very lucky man that you are kind enough to humour me in my infatuation."

I laugh. That's so him. Humour him in his infatuation! He knows that if anything it's the other way around. He knows, because he knows me, and sees everything that's in my heart. To others I may be distant, inscrutable, and silent, but to him I am, and always have been, an open book. He needs only to look in my eyes to know exactly what he means to me.

"Oh, Walter, why do you always doubt yourself?" He whispers, and I realise that his eyes are open, and he is gazing at me in the darkness. "You shouldn't. In all my travels I have never met a kinder soul, or one I loved more." He has a knack of saying things that if anyone else said them, would sound strange, or stupid, or even embarrassing. From him...well, another lump rises in my throat.

"I suppose I've always wondered why you come back to me."

"I come back because you are home," he says softly, and then he wraps his arms around me, and takes me to the warm peace of his love.

We sleep, on and off, and whenever I wake I have the scent of him in my nostrils, and the feel of his flesh against mine, the taste of him still on my tongue, and I wish it could last forever. I do wonder why he returns to me each time. I wonder what it must be like to be him. He is so very un-self-aware. While he knows he's different, I don't think he really understands what makes him special. It's hard to define. Sometimes I feel sorry for him. He is one of a kind, like the last creature of an extinct species, and while he inhabits our world, and walks among us, he doesn't truly belong. He will always be other. An outsider. Loved by us for sure, but not of us. Lonely, he takes his shelter among strangers, always seeking, always travelling; searching for something lost. I'm not sure what he is looking for, and maybe he doesn't either. It is always just out of reach, and his path takes him to places I would fear to go, into the twilight worlds of the unseen, and mysterious. He is our go-between, our link to the beyond, and he has been blessed with the gift, or maybe it is a burden, to bridge the two worlds, and pass easily between them.

His sleep is disturbed, as it often is when first he returns to me. If he stays for more than a few days then the nightmares recede, and he has some respite, but when first he arrives it is always like this. He lies, quivering, in my arms, fast asleep, and I soothe him with

meaningless words, and wait for the worst to pass.

It's hard to believe that I have known him for so long, and yet even harder to believe that there was a time when I did not know him. I feel as if he has been part of me since the day I was born. I admit I was sceptical when I first met him. His reputation had preceded him, but I was prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt. As I got to know him, I could not help but admire him. It was always impossible to dislike him. He has an easy charm, and a guileless innocence. It was only in the aftermath of my wife's death that I first grew close to him though.

He was the only one to see through my gruff dismissals of sympathetic platitudes in those hard, early days, and to simply be there. I didn't even notice him at first, so wrapped up was I in my own grief, pain, and guilt. It was he who insisted on taking me out to Gina's every evening during those first lonely months. He who managed to get me to eat at least one meal a day by the simple contrivance of telling me how hurt Gina would be if I disdained her food. She connived with him in this, as people always do with him, feigning distress if there was even so much as one tiny morsel left on my plate. Between them I did at least manage not to starve to death. I don't know what I did to deserve his kindness. At that time all I felt was my own angry guilt, and he worked at loosening that, little by little, chipping away at my defences until it all came out. How I felt I had betrayed Sharon, not loved her in the way she deserved; how I had driven her to the divorce courts. I had been selfish, and silent, when I should have shared my burdens with her, so at least she could have understood my moods, and the darkness that hung around me like an impending storm.

He listened, and nodded, and never once dismissed my feelings with platitudes, but then, slowly, imperceptibly, he built me back up. He made me see how hard I had tried to protect her from the reality of my job, and finally convinced me that her death had not been my fault. That was the hardest part of all – maybe I still, deep inside, blame myself just a little for that. My job placed her in danger. My enemies targeted her. I should, at least, have warned her. It still confounds me that this evil exists in the world, and I feel helpless, in thrall to it, without the weapons to fight back. He has his own experience of evil, and maybe that lends him more confidence to do battle. I do know that without him our world is lost. He is, quite possibly, our only hope. When first he became my friend, I was too lost in my own despair to appreciate what that meant. He came, and went, in and out of my life, showing up in my office at regular intervals to show me this or that. Sometimes he was quiet, and reflective, and at others bright, and full of enthusiasm, and I was surprised by how much I came to look forward to seeing him. It was about a year after Sharon's death when he first kissed me. I remember being surprised only that I wasn't surprised, if that makes any kind of sense. I remember that in the dark heat of that first night, he made me forget her, and that the next day I hated myself for that.

"It's not a betrayal, Walter," he said softly, finding me alone on my balcony the following morning, brooding. "Sharon would want you to be happy, just as I do." And he did make me happy. He still does. I wish I could do the same for him.

He is fighting the demons again tonight. There is a small rivulet of sweat, soaking into that thick, dark hair, and his face is paler than usual. He is twitching, and turning in his sleep. Like

this, just the two of us, alone in the night, I can see what is not visible when he is awake: his destiny is taking its toll on him. He is just one man, with an incalculable burden. I know that curiosity led him into the dark, and his own good heart brought him out the other side, seemingly unscathed. At times like this, I know that evil took its toll, and he was marked by it, however hard he tries to disguise it. Maybe it's because he has known both dark and light that he understands the coming peril that is already wrapping cold arms around the world. He looks so lost, and alone, lying here tonight, but I know he is not. When he finally does battle, I will be by his side.

He wakes, a scream dying in his throat, and I pull him close until his breathing quiets.

"I was in the woods," he murmurs, and I nod, understanding. He has never told me the full story, and I will never ask. I can see some of it in his eyes, and I'm not sure I'm ready for the rest. "I went into the dark," he tells me, his body limp and exhausted in my arms. "And when I looked in the mirror, I saw my face, but not me. I wasn't there. I was gone, Walter. Someone else had taken my place. Darkness was there. Madness." He shudders, and I hold him even tighter, and kiss his forehead.

"It's all right. I know. I know." I do know. I understand the realm of nightmares. I've had them myself: he has, in his time, nursed me through similar night terrors.

"I did things..." he whispers.

"Hush."

"It wasn't me, but I couldn't stop..." He has told me this before, but each time we have to go through it again. I know that he is as kind to himself as he is to others. He knows it wasn't him, but even so, I can't imagine what it must have been like for him, standing by, and being a witness to evil done in his name, in his body. I've experienced something similar myself, all too recently, and I know how hard it is to do something against your nature, because you have no choice.

"Hush, hush. It's all right, Dale." I rarely use his first name. Only at times like this, when he's shivering in my arms like a child, and needs the comfort of his given name. Somehow it soothes him. By day, he is 'Coop', as he has always been, as he was introduced to me all those years ago.

"You're a good man, Walter. A damn fine man," he murmurs, holding onto me as if I'm all that stands between him and the dark. Soon he is asleep again, and I hold him as dawn's first light filters through the window.

Now is not the time to tell him about the sickness in my blood, and a conspiracy spiralling out of control. Now is not the time to share with him Mulder's recent findings, and my own betrayal. He will not judge me, because he never does, but he has worries enough right now. Later, when wakes, and is feeling better, I'll tell him everything. That is partly why he has come back. He knows something has happened for he is drawn to the darkness, wherever it exists, even if it is inside me, as it was once inside him. Our lives are linked by

both darkness and light. We fight the one, and try to live in the other. One day, I'd like to believe that we could grow old together, in a house by the sea, in one of those small towns that he loves so much, but first we have a battle to fight, and neither of us is the kind of man to turn away from that. I think, maybe, it was why we were born.

He sleeps on, in my arms, as daylight banishes the night's demons. Soon, he will wake, and he'll compliment me on my coffee as usual, and then I will tell him what has happened in his absence. I worry about how he'll receive the news, and yet I know that he will dispel my doubts, and reassure me, and I also know, that however I feel about myself right now, he will never stop loving me.

Coop, being Coop, will find the light somewhere within the darkness, and he will, as always, make me smile again.

The End.

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