Werleyville was a monument to misplaced optimism. The main street—the only street—was very wide, as if the builders had pictured swarms of wagons bustling to and fro. The half dozen buildings that lined each side of the street were two-story edifices built of native limestone and
imported granite. Two of the buildings sported ornate pillars and fancy carved friezes involving leaves and flowers and fruits and animals: symbols of bounty and wealth. Xander suspected that one of those buildings had been the Werleyville Bank and the other was intended as the courthouse. There was a grand fountain near one end of the street, with chastely dressed mermaids in the middle and stone benches around the edges. If it had ever been hooked up to a water source, that well had long since run dry. But someone must have imagined men in top hats and women in wide skirts gathering around that fountain, cooled by the trickling sound as they gossiped.

In reality, only a few wagons had ever traveled the wide street, and nobody had ever chatted around the fountain. The bank may have briefly held some treasure, but not a single case had ever been heard in the courthouse. The gold mine on which Werleyville had placed its hopes played out early. Even as the last bits of value were being scraped and dug from beneath the earth, a shaft had collapsed and a dozen men had died a terrible
death. The survivors abandoned Werleyville, and the city that never was died too.

Xander bought the place on eBay for $648,000.

It was a good deal. The stone buildings had been constructed well and they remained fairly intact over the decades. At some point in the 1970s someone had hoped to turn the city into a tourist attraction, and that person—a foolish optimist as well—had fixed the place up a little, paving the road into Werleyville from the state highway, repairing a few of the buildings, and sinking a brand-new well.

The well was located directly behind the former Werleyville Saloon, so that was the building Xander chose to move into. Besides, the long oak bar was still there, the tin ceiling was in decent shape, and on the wall there was a dusty and warped painting of naked ladies cavorting with satyrs in a mythical forest glen.

At first, Xander had to live pretty rough, although
he had a generator for power and a roof over his head. But he had plenty of time on his hands, and within less than a year after he’d moved in he had running water—hot and cold—and solar power. He had satellite TV and internet with Skype. He’d glazed the windows and had the road repaved. He had a small but functional kitchen, complete with two huge freezers, a fridge, a stove, and a microwave. He’d polished the bar until the old wood gleamed, he’d painted the tin ceiling, and the naked ladies were still a little warped but no longer dusty. He had named some of them; the chubby blonde in the bottom left corner was Gretchen.

He had also started a little garden behind the well, which had been backbreaking work because the ground in Werleyville was mostly rock and not much soil. He’d eventually had a truckload of topsoil delivered, and had driven to the nearest town—thirty miles distant—to fill the back of his pickup with bags of manure. Due to marauding deer, a fence around the plot had been a necessity too. Now he had fresh veggies though, and they
tasted infinitely better than the plastic crap from the supermarket. He’d even planted a few trees—apples and plums and cherries—and although they were too small now, in a few years he hoped he’d have fruit and a little more shade.

When he’d first moved in, he had slept on an air mattress and kept his stuff in cardboard boxes. But then he’d carved and assembled himself a bed. A few of the spindles on the headboard were a little uneven, but overall he thought it looked pretty nice and he was proud of it. He put the bed in the largest of the upstairs rooms and he’d built a bathroom there too. It wasn’t very aesthetically pleasing—he figured he’d have time later to make it pretty—but it had a huge claw-foot tub that he’d found at an architectural salvage place in Emeryville, and he’d rigged up a shower too. And of course he’d installed a toilet and sink and mirror, so he had all the basics covered.

Next he’d made himself a round table—oak to match the bar—and two chairs. He didn’t know why he bothered with the second chair, except
that having only one seemed lopsided and pathetic. He bought the couch since major upholstery was beyond his current skill set. It was leather and really comfy, and he’d placed it underneath the partying ladies and the satyrs.

He would probably build a dresser next. He had the materials already and a general idea of what he wanted. He was looking forward to the sweet oblivion of woodworking, when his mind would be too busy with his task to occupy itself with other matters, when the entire rest of the world would just fall away for a few hours.

In the evenings Xander would sprawl on his couch, cold beer in hand, watching his big-screen TV. Rocko would be curled up at his side, sometimes barking softly in his sleep. Xander wondered if his dreams were good ones.

Rocko was a medium-sized dog, sort of yellowish, with one ear that stood straight up and one that flopped. He wasn’t especially smart. Xander had nearly run him over on one of his rare trips into
town; the dog had been just standing there in the middle of the road, too dumb to run from cars. He was skinny and dirty and wasn’t wearing a collar. Xander had stopped and opened the door, intending to shoo him away, but then Rocko had wagged his tail and limped on over. He hopped right into the cab, scrambled over Xander’s lap, and settled onto the passenger seat as if he’d been doing so his entire life.

Xander took him to the one vet in town, a tall, graying man who mostly treated livestock. “Someone dumped him,” Dr. Adamson said. He knew Xander was the eccentric hermit who’d bought that useless old ghost town, and he wondered what the hell had happened to Xander’s left eye. “People have a pet they don’t want anymore and they just shove ’em out their cars in the middle of nowhere. Fool themselves into thinking the animals will survive in the wild. Assholes.”

Xander agreed.
Dr. Adamson went on to treat the dog’s torn paws, then discovered and removed several stones from his stomach: the genesis of Rocko’s name. As Xander was paying the bill, he realized that he seemed to have acquired a dog. Possibly a chow/lab/retriever/border collie mix, the vet said. Or possibly not. Dr. Adamson—deciding that Xander was a softhearted fool and maybe a little touched in the head but a good enough guy—had neutered poor Rocko for free.

Rocko was ecstatic with his new home. He dug holes and unsuccessfully hunted rodents and barked at things. He found the only dead skunk for miles and rolled in it. During the winter he tracked mud all over the plank floors that Xander had lovingly refinished. He snored. He listened when Xander had conversations with him and he cuddled next to him on the couch. If Xander didn’t watch him carefully, he still ate rocks.

***
Xander regretfully admitted to himself that it was time to go into town again. He needed to restock the freezer, he was almost out of beer, and Rocko’s supply of kibble was running low. Besides, if he was ever going to tackle that dresser he needed a dovetail jig and some new drill bits.

“A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do,” he said to Rocko, who thumped his tail in happy agreement.

Xander showered—reminding himself to get soap and shampoo while he was in town—shaved off his beard and combed his hair, which had grown ridiculously long. Having someone cut it for him was out of the question and he wasn’t brave enough to do the job himself. He used a rubber band to tie it back, hoping it would make him look slightly less Tarzanesque, then pulled on jeans and a clean but faded shirt.
Rocko jumped into the truck beside him and they rumbled slowly down the road; Xander wasn’t in a hurry. Since he got crappy radio reception out here and his CD player was on the fritz, he sang as he drove. Show tunes, because Rocko didn’t mind. Songs from *Oklahoma* and *West Side Story* and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. He was still warbling about the sobbin’ women when the noise in his head began.

It wasn’t too bad at first: just a stray phrase or two when he passed another car or when he drove by one of the few, scattered houses. *...should have hit the bathroom before we left ... I’m not gonna make rent next month if Sam doesn’t ... have tuna sandwiches for dinner and then tomorrow ... hate the way she won’t call me back...* The thoughts drifted away almost faster than he could catch them and that was dandy with him.

But as he crossed the city limits, the sounds grew louder. It was only a two-stoplight town but there were still enough people for the thoughts to overlap, to flow into his brain like waves battering
a beach. That guy in the red Ford was about to be late to a doctor appointment because he hadn’t wanted to go and his wife had made him. That teenager inside the Dairy Queen was certain her boyfriend was cheating on her. The woman who worked in the post office was thinking again about retiring. All at once and all speaking over each other, until his hands were gripping the steering wheel hard enough to turn his knuckles white, and his single eye was squinted to a slit as if that would protect him from the onslaught.

He parked his truck in front of Timmons’ Hardware and Garden. Rocko hopped out when he did and followed him into the store.

Much to Xander’s relief, the store was empty except for the middle-aged cashier with a droopy mustache and a stock boy who was hidden away somewhere in the back. Xander grabbed a shopping cart and headed to the tool aisle.

The stock boy was seventeen so he was thinking about sex. Xander tried very hard to shut him out;
any sex other than solo had been off-limits for a long time, and the entire topic was very uncomfortable for him. The clerk’s thoughts were only slightly less discomfiting. *...get that strike settled soon so the season can begin. Man, I was hoping the Niners would have a good year. There’s that crazy guy and his mutt again. Good customer. Bet he’s doing something weird up there in Werleyville. Something kinky I bet. Or maybe he’s some kinda gangster. That would explain the eye. Could be one of them religious weirdos. Kind that thinks Jesus is gonna come swoop him up in a spaceship or something. Still, he’s a good customer.*

As he always did, Xander tried to ignore the voices, instead focusing on the small array of saws and jigs on the shelf in front of him. He’d known for a long time what the locals thought of him. Hell, he knew what *everyone* thought of him, and that was only one of the many costs of his “gift.” Beside him, Rocko nosed at a leaf blower and seemed to be considering the benefits of lifting his leg. Xander decided it was time to go. He grabbed
the dovetail jig, added it to the other purchases in his cart, and wheeled his way to the cash register.

“Hello,” he said to the clerk, flashing his goofiest grin. It wouldn’t do him any good to let people know what was really going on inside his head.

The man gave a nod. “Afternoon.” They remained silent while he rang up the purchases and Xander handed over his Platinum Visa. The clerk took it without comment.

Xander stowed his plastic bags inside the locked compartment in the bed of his truck. Then he and Rocko hopped back in the cab and he drove slowly down the street. He looked longingly at Mo’s Bakery and Coffee as he passed. Xander had tried to eat there once, shortly after he’d arrived in town and before he had anything resembling a kitchen hooked up. The coffee had been good and the slice of peach pie had been wonderful. But he couldn’t finish it—too many voices clamoring inside his head: Wondering who he was and what he was up to. Judging him. Going on and on about
things that had nothing to do with him, many of them really, really private. He’d felt ill and left the pie only half eaten.

Buying dog food was easy. Xander backed his truck into the loading space alongside the feed store and a gangly kid in his late teens came ambling out. He stuck his hand in through the passenger side window and scratched Rocko’s ears, which sent the dog into bouts of tail-whacking euphoria. “How many bags, Mr. Harris?” the kid asked.

“How many bags, Mr. Harris?”

“Three. And throw in a couple boxes of Milk-Bones and a rawhide bone or two. Oh, and a three-pack of pig ears.”

“Sure thing.” The feed store kid wasn’t especially bright. He thought almost exclusively about his parents’ ranch and the car he hoped to buy someday. It was kind of refreshing, and Xander always tipped him a couple of bucks for loading up the truck.
There was one grocery store in town. Xander had to tie Rocko up outside, and as always, the dog looked mournful. Xander suspected that every time he left Rocko, the dog thought he would never come back. So Xander reassured him as he always did—“Back in fifteen, buddy”—took a deep breath, and entered the store.

There were a lot more people here and the internal din was much, much worse. He smiled wanly at people as he passed them with his shopping cart, all the time wishing he didn’t know who had a kink for dirty underwear or who just had a disturbing diagnosis or who was thinking about shooting himself in the head if he didn’t get a decent job soon.

Xander filled his cart quickly with a lot of meat, with a few staples like ketchup and mustard, with a bunch of loaves of bread he could freeze, and with a few boxes of Twinkies and Oreos. He remembered the soap and shampoo. The cart was overflowing by the time he pushed it to the front. The checkout woman was old enough to be his
mother, but her thoughts were anything but maternal: she thought he was cute, like a sexy pirate or something. He resisted the temptation to say, “Ahoy, me matey!” After she’d rung up everything in his cart and he’d told her to add a dozen cases of Coors to his tab, he paid and began toting groceries to the truck. Rocko watched him walk back and forth, and soon the truck bed was packed full.

Xander untied his dog as he made the last journey across the parking lot. A pretty young woman was just getting out of a car two spaces over. He smiled at her as she came around to unstrap her toddler from a car seat. *Oh my God, what a creep!* *What if he wants to kidnap me? What if he wants to kidnap Mallory? I bet he uses that dog to lure children. I bet he’s on Megan’s list. I’m so gonna look him up when I get home. Ought to be easy with that creepy eye patch. What’s his license plate number?*

With a heavy sigh, Xander climbed into the truck,
waited for Rocko to settle beside him, and drove home.

Part Two

Xander missed pizza a lot. There was no pizza delivery service in town, and even if there were, he certainly would have lived out of range. Out of necessity he’d become a decent cook; sometimes he even looked up recipes online. After his return from town, he decided on caveman food: a really nice rib-eye barely browned over flames in the fire pit behind the saloon, a hunk of bread to sop up the juices, and a couple of tomatoes he’d grown himself. He didn’t even bother with silverware, because who was going to complain about his table manners? Hell, Rocko was pleased as punch to lick the mess off Xander’s fingers when the meal was over.

Another nice thing about living with a dog was that Xander could lounge around wearing
whatever he wanted; in the summer that meant boxer shorts. He liked being able to sprawl on his couch and watch SyFy in his underwear. Back when he’d lived at Slayer headquarters, the couches were always too crowded for sprawling, the TV schedule was heavy on crime shows and chick flicks, and he had to wear pants.

Now, however, Xander reposed comfortably, his stomach pleasingly full, a can of beer within easy reach, and a movie involving exploding aliens on the big screen. It was all good. And then Rocko started to bark.

Rocko barking was nothing unusual. He barked at mice and beetles and dust bunnies, and sometimes he barked at nothing at all. So the only attention Xander paid at first was to turn up the television volume. But then the barking grew louder and more insistent, and Rocko ran to the front door, growling as if all the demons in hell had come to visit. Which wasn’t impossible, the way Xander’s life went.
Xander sighed and clicked the TV off. He padded to the door. Maybe it was a coyote; Rocko had a grudge against them, the same way a person might detest their disreputable redneck cousin. But then there was a brief pause between barks—maybe Rocko had to catch his breath—and Xander caught the sound of an approaching engine. On very rare occasions, a lost tourist showed up in Werleyville, but not at night. Xander considered putting on some jeans, but then decided against it. If someone was going to intrude in his town, that someone was going to have to deal with the town’s owner in boxers.

The road was hidden by a bend right before it reached the buildings, so Xander saw the headlights before he saw the car. Even once the car came into view it was hard to make out any details because Main Street was lit only by stars and moon and the light that came through the saloon’s open doorway. It wasn’t as if installing streetlights had been one of Xander’s major priorities. As the car pulled to a halt across the street from him, Xander could tell by the faint
silhouette that it was an old muscle car, a Charger maybe. The engine cut off and the car just sat there, hot metal ticking loudly. Even Rocko seemed confused; he’d stopped barking and now sat slightly in front of Xander, staring at the car, his head cocked to the floppy-eared side.

After what felt like a millennium, the driver’s side door opened. A long minute or two later, someone climbed out. Xander still couldn’t make out the person’s features in the darkness, especially since the person seemed to be dressed in dark clothes. But he could hear the slight crunch of boots on asphalt as the person approached. And then the intruder stopped to light a cigarette, and in the brief time that the lighter flamed, Xander could see his face.

“Spike!”

Spike didn’t answer. He put his lighter away, took a few puffs from his cigarette, then prowled closer. He stopped a good ten feet from the saloon’s long front porch; he just stood there,
staring at Xander and Rocko. He was wearing the same outfit as always—duster, jeans, tee—but his hair was what Xander presumed was his natural color, and it was cut short instead of slicked back. He had that slight smirk on his face, as if Xander were doing something especially amusing. “Didn’t realize the dress code was so casual,” Spike finally said.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Xander demanded impatiently. He didn’t step off the porch. “If Buffy sent you to try and convince me to come back—”

“Slayer didn’t send me,” Spike interrupted. Xander wasn’t sure if he was relieved or disappointed. The truth was, at the very end, his presence at Slayer headquarters had been as uncomfortable for his friends as it had been for him. Nobody likes having their secrets laid bare all the time. Buffy and Willow and Giles had put up only token resistance when he announced his plans to leave.

Xander crossed his arms over his bare chest.
“Then why are you here?”

Spike dropped the cigarette and ground the butt with his heel. “Invite me in and I’ll tell you.”

Xander took a moment to ponder the vampire’s request. Maybe Spike had lost his soul and wanted a nice nibble of Xander for dinner. Except Spike didn’t just happen to be passing by—and surely there must have been more convenient people for him to eat. It wasn’t as if they hated one another enough for Spike to go out of his way to track Xander down, not even in the bad old days. A few years after Sunnydale collapsed, Spike had shocked everyone by showing up at headquarters, sort of bedraggled and somehow older-looking, but definitely not dust. He’d hung around for a little while, told a horrific tale about a battle in LA and Angel’s final death, and then disappeared again. He’d reappear every few months after that, usually in bad shape, and he’d help out with the Armageddon du jour before riding off into the sunset again. During these infrequent visits, Spike and Xander hadn’t exactly
become besties, but they hadn’t tried to kill each other either. Sometimes they even hid out with Giles in his library, drinking whiskey and bantering and generally taking an estrogen vacation.

“Come on in, Spike,” Xander said with a sigh.

Spike marched up onto the porch. He surprised Xander by scritching Rocko’s head as he passed by, and then he sauntered into the saloon and stood there, looking around. Xander and Rocko followed him inside and Xander shut the door.

“Gotta say, whelp, never occurred to me to live in a pub. Would’ve saved myself loads of walking.”

“It’s not a pub, Spike. In case you haven’t noticed, this isn’t exactly Stratford-on-Avon. It’s a saloon.”

“Don’t see John Wayne or Clint Eastwood hanging about either.” Spike grinned at him. “Is it a working saloon? ’Cause right now I’d fancy some rotgut or even plonk or Yank piss-water.”
Xander interpreted this as a request for adult beverages. “I got beer. Hang on.”

Rocko stayed with Spike as Xander went to the kitchen and fetched a can of Coors from the fridge. Then he had second thoughts and grabbed another, even though he had a half-full can near the couch. He had the feeling that more alcohol was going to be a good thing tonight.

Back in the main room, Xander handed Spike a can. Spike made a face but popped it open anyway and took a long swallow. Xander chugged the rest of his half-can and then started on the freshie. As Spike closely examined the painting of the naked women and the satyrs, absently petting Rocko with his free hand, Xander collapsed onto the couch. “You promised explanations,” he said.

“Yeah. I expect I did.” Spike sat down at the opposite end of the couch and Rocko immediately leapt up and settled into the space between them, tongue lolling happily as if the dog had been waiting for this all along.
And then Spike said nothing for a long time. He played with his beer can and stared up at the ceiling and jiggled his legs. For once, Xander actually tried to use his curse to find out what was going on in Spike’s head, but he got nothing. That wasn’t too unusual—people who were aware he was telepathic could usually block him out for a while. Unfortunately, within a few hours the telepathy always found its way around those barriers and then those thoughts would come through as loud and clear as everyone else’s.

Xander was still impatient. On the other hand, it wasn’t as if he had to be anywhere. And it was kind of nice to have company, company whose thoughts weren’t dancing through Xander’s head, even if that company was Spike. So Xander said nothing either. He sipped his Coors and stroked Rocko’s back.

At long last, Spike cleared his throat. “Slayer told me you’d moved to the arsehole of nowhere because you’d been cursed. Didn’t specify the
affliction, though. I reckoned I’d find you all hideous-like. Oozing pus or with horns and a tail or summat.”

“No pus, horns, or tail,” Xander replied with a sigh. “Just the ability to read minds.”

Spike looked startled. “Read— So you know what I’m thinking right now?”

“No. Not yet.” Something tugged at the corner of Xander’s brain, some logical step he was missing, but he didn’t pursue it.

“Oh. How’d you get saddled with this then?”

Xander didn’t want to tell the story. It was just too—stupid. Typical. Harrislike. But Spike was looking at him with one eyebrow raised, and Xander figured that if the vampire really wanted to know, he’d find out from Buffy or someone else. “I was dating a vengeance demon,” Xander said wearily.
Spike barked out a laugh. “Again? ’T’s your type, is it?”

“No. It’s just ... everyone I date turns out to be a demon anyway, and I figured at least this one wasn’t gonna want to eat me, and I kinda know the territory already.”

“Good in the sack as well, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Xander replied a little wistfully. “Experienced and inventive.”

“And you fucked it up.”

“Yep. I mean, things were going pretty well. We’d been seeing each other for six, seven months. But then we got in this huge fight because I wasn’t being romantic enough or something. I don’t know. I wasn’t meeting his needs, he said.”

Spike blinked. “Wait. His?”

“Yeah, Spike. I’m officially flying the rainbow
demon flag. Have been for a long time.”

“Thought you liked birds.”

“I do. I like men and women. Or, apparently, I like male and female demons. I’m a bi-demosexual.”

He half-expected Spike to start making fun of him, maybe pulling out one of the ten thousand British ways to call someone a pansy, but Spike only shrugged. “So you and your bloke were having a row...” he prompted.

“We were. He said I wasn’t meeting his needs and I said how the fuck was I supposed to know what his needs were if he didn’t tell me. I’m not a mind-reader.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh is right.”

“And he won’t lift the curse?”
Xander shook his head. “No. I stopped seeing him, of course, which only pissed him off worse, and then I didn’t want to tell anyone about it because I felt like such an idiot. Didn’t need them judging me—to my face or in their thoughts. By the time I spilled to the gang a few weeks had gone by, and Darko said it was stuck on for good. Buffy threatened to slay him and he still stuck with his story, so I guess it was true. Giles and Willow looked stuff up to see if they could magic the curse away, but they couldn’t find anything.”

Spike thought for a moment. “You dated a vengeance demon called Darko and then were surprised when things went sour.”

“But I wasn’t surprised. Things always go sour for me, Spike. I just didn’t know the specific way my life would be fucked up this time.” Xander squinted at the TV screen, which was blank. “Besides, he was really hot.”

To Xander’s surprise, Spike chuckled. “Well, can’t say I’ve never fallen for pretty trouble myself, can
I?” He shifted around a little on the couch and ran his fingers through the funny little patch of lighter fur near Rocko’s right hind leg. Rocko looked slightly overcome with his good fortune in being petted by two people at once. “So once you decided the telepathy was permanent, you moved as far from people as you could get.”

“Pretty much,” Xander agreed.

“Where’d you get the dosh?”

Now it was Xander’s turn to chuckle. “I won it. Might as well make the fucking curse pay its way. I spent a few months traveling around, playing poker in Vegas and Reno and card rooms.” And Christ, it had been really painful for him to spend time among the crowds in those places, but in the end he’d come away set for life, at least as long as he didn’t get carried away with cocaine or diamond jewelry or private jets.

Spike nodded and then stood. He walked across the room and disappeared into the kitchen,
returning a few seconds later with more beer for them both. Xander took his gratefully. Spike spent more time wandering around, running his hand along the smooth wood of the bar, poking at the ancient woodstove Xander kept in the corner even though it was too dilapidated to use, kicking at the copper spittoon where Xander stored his muddy boots during winter. Then he turned back to look at Xander. “And what do you do up here, all by your lonesome? Aside from watching telly and exercising your cowboy nudism kink.”

Xander smiled. “A kinky cowboy nudist would wear chaps and nothing else. Mmm ... maybe a Stetson. Anyway, this place keeps me really busy. It was pretty much in ruins when I bought it. Most of the town still is, but I’ve got the saloon pretty livable. It’s a hell of a lot of work to fix up old buildings like these.”

“Last time people drank in this saloon, I reckon I was still alive,” Spike said thoughtfully. He was still pacing slowly, still touching everything. “I read penny dreadfuls when I was a boy. I’d spend my
pocket money on the *Boys Own Pocket Library*, tripe like that. Tales of wild Red Indians and stagecoach drivers and sharpshooters and herds of bison and... It all seemed so exotic to me. I drove my mum to distraction, running about the garden and pretending I was a cowboy.” His voice became very quiet near the end and he glanced over at Xander as if he were embarrassed.

But Xander was imagining a blue-eyed boy in short pants, his face smudged with dirt, shooting his finger at imaginary war-painted foes. He smiled. “I used to want to play cowboys and Indians, too, but Willow insisted on calling them indigenous peoples and she wouldn’t let the cowboys shoot at them, so that pretty much took all the fun out of it for me. We usually ended up playing house instead.”

“Which is why you turned into a poofter,” Spike said with a grin.

“Yeah, that’s right. A few more turns with the Barbies and the Easy-Bake and I’d've been a
completely flaming fairy instead of just bi.”

Rocko suddenly hopped off the couch and ran to the door. Xander hurried to let him out, and the dog ran off into the darkness. Rocko was housebroken when Xander found him but, like a small child, he didn’t seem to realize he had to go until it was almost too late. Xander had learned the hard way that when Rocko wanted out, fleet feet were an asset.

Spike walked over and stood beside Xander in the doorway, peering down Main Street as if watching Rocko take a dump was fascinating. Xander hadn’t stood so close to anyone in a long time, at least not for longer than a few seconds. The sensation was disconcerting. “Why are you here?” he asked.

“Haven’t been getting on with the Slayers.”

“Well, that’s nothing new. Every time you came by, Giles and I practically placed bets on whether one of ’em was gonna stake you that week. So you’re ... taking a break from them again. Why
“’T’s more than a break,” Spike said with a slight shake of his head. “I can’t ... can’t manage it at all anymore. ’T’s not just the time I’m with them—it’s the time I’m away.”

Xander didn’t understand what Spike meant. “So if you’re not getting along, go away and stay away. Hang out with someone—” He stopped suddenly as Spike turned his head to shoot him a dark look. Then Xander understood. “Oh ... nobody?”

Spike practically growled at him. “Dru’s been gone for ages, Peaches and his crew are all dead, and there’s not exactly an eHarmony for souled vampires, is there? In my big-bad days I might’ve turned myself a mate, but now ...” His laughter was humorless. “Perhaps I ought to get a dog.”

As if on cue, Rocko came shooting back into the saloon. He did a quick run around the room, sniffed suspiciously at a table leg, and then
collapsed onto the floor with a little huff.

Xander felt an odd twisting sensation in his chest as he finally realized why Spike had arrived. “You want to stay here,” he said.

Spike nodded without looking at him.

“I’m sorry, Spike. You can’t.” He was somewhat surprised to find that he meant it—he truly was sorry.

But Spike spun to glare at him. “’T’s all right to shag a vengeance demon but you can’t abide a vampire?”

“No, it’s not that. I—”

“I’m not a bother, you know. Won’t eat your food—can hunt deer and the like for myself.”

“I’m sure you can. It’s not you, Spike. It’s me and my goddamn curse. You have no idea what it’s like. It’s not just embarrassing or annoying. If I
hadn’t moved out here I would have gone fucking crazy.”

Spike’s anger melted away into something else. Sympathy, maybe. “I can stay in another building. I know the rest of them are still wrecks, but they can’t be any worse than the crypts I’ve lived in.”

“This town ain’t big enough for the both of us,” Xander said with a forced smile. “Literally. My range is longer than Main Street.”

Spike slumped as if he’d been wounded. “Right then. Ta for the beer.” He stepped out onto the porch but Xander caught his arm.

“Wait. I’m gonna turn in soon anyway. Why don’t you spend the night here? Save you from having to find a place to crash before morning. There’s not much around here. You can head out at sunset tomorrow.”

They both remained frozen like that for a moment, Xander in and Spike out, Xander’s hand
on Spike’s arm. Then Spike nodded. “Yeah. Okay.”

Rocko seemed pleased with the decision—he thumped his tail twice when Spike reentered. Then Spike and Xander sat on the couch again, and they drank a couple more beers apiece, and they watched forgettable crap on TV. Spike took off his duster and boots. Xander kept on his boxers. Eventually Xander dozed off a little, waking with a start when a loud commercial for running shoes came on.

“You snore,” Spike announced.

Xander grinned sleepily. “Sorry, your majesty.” Then he stood and stretched. “I’m gonna head upstairs.”

“Bit early for me. All right if I watch the telly a while longer?”

“Yeah, sure. Just leave me some beer, okay? And, uh ... I only have the one bed. You gonna be okay with the couch? It’s pretty comfy. Obviously.”
“’T’s fine.”

“There’s no windows down here, so I guess you’re safe from immolation.”

“Another benefit of living in a saloon.”

“Well, good night then.”

Spike gave him a little wave.

Rocko looked back and forth between the two of them and then hopped onto the couch, the traitor.

Xander trudged up the stairs. The railing and most of the treads had rotted away long before he moved in. He had repaired the steps themselves but not the banister, which would possibly violate safety codes, if Werleyville had any. But Xander didn’t care; he had an in with the mayor. When he got upstairs, Xander grabbed one of the pillows off his bed and a spare blanket from one of the
cardboard boxes. He walked back to the stairs and tossed the bedding over the edge, making Spike look up in surprise. “Sweet dreams,” Xander said.

“Cheers, mate.”

Xander headed to his bare-bones bathroom, where he pissed and brushed his teeth and flossed. Then he ambled to the bed, stretched once more, and collapsed onto the mattress. Because it was warm out he had only a light blanket, which he pulled to his chin. It was strange how empty the bed felt with just him. He was used to Rocko’s company. Xander reached over and flicked off the lamp.

And then it hit him, the thing that had been niggling at his brain the whole evening, the way a flea might torment Rocko. His telepathy hadn’t worked on Spike that night, even before Spike knew about the curse. Spike hadn’t been blocking Xander purposely. Xander just couldn’t read his thoughts.
“I always knew there was nothing going on in your brain!” Xander hooted happily.

Spike poked his head out from the blanket and blinked blearily at him. He looked sort of adorable. “Wha’?”

Xander cackled at him. “Hang on. Gotta get the door.” And he ran, because Rocko had apparently decided that it was time to wake up and that his bladder was most urgently full. Xander barely made it and Rocko ended up pissing all over one of the porch pillars, not for the first time. It was a fine day, Xander saw as he walked onto the porch: blue skies with a few wispy clouds, a little bit of a breeze making the tree leaves dance.

Eyes dropping to street level, he noted that Spike
did indeed drive a Charger, a beat-up-looking thing that had more primer than paint. Xander decided that it was kind of nice having two vehicles parked in the street instead of just one. It was Werleyville’s equivalent of a traffic jam. Made the place look more ... lived in.

Rocko followed Xander through the door, pausing to nuzzle a thank you and good morning with his cold wet nose onto Xander’s bare thigh. Then he stood expectantly near the kitchen doorway, waiting for breakfast. But Xander plopped down on the couch instead; Spike pulled his feet away just in time to avoid getting sat on.

“What’s going on, you daft bugger?” Spike asked with a yawn.

“I want you to think at me, Spike.”

“Wha’?”

“Think. Think thoughts. Any kind of thoughts at all, doesn’t matter. Just concentrate, okay?”
Spike blinked some more, then frowned. Xander listened. And all he heard was Rocko panting and a jay calling noisily outside. He grinned. “Do you watch HBO, Spike?”

“Wha’?” Spike asked for the third time.

“HBO. You know, cable TV. Or in my case, satellite. They have pretty good shows. Lately I’ve been kind of into this one show, *Game of Thrones*. It’s got these medieval kings and stuff.”

Spike finally sat up all the way, pulling the blanket with him. His shoulders and upper chest were bare; Xander spied the pile of black clothing next to the couch and realized that unless Spike had unexpectedly taken to wearing underwear, the vampire was probably naked under that blanket. Interesting, but not important at the moment.

“What are you on about?” Spike asked him slowly, as if Xander were foreign or addled.

“There’s another show on HBO that I never watch
'cause it has vampires and werewolves and that kind of stuff and frankly, I have enough of that already. But a couple of the Slayers were into it and I caught parts of a few episodes before I moved here. There’s this girl in the show who’s psychic, right? They didn’t really get that part right on the show, because she seems pretty okay around people most of the time. But the thing is, she can’t read vampires’ minds. So she falls in love with this dark and broody one, but then there’s this sexy blond who also wants her and ... um, not the point.”

“There is a point, is there?” Spike asked.

“Yep! The stupid HBO show is right. I can’t read your mind!”

It took Spike a few moments to process this. “You can’t... Why not?”

“Dunno. I can read humans. Even Slayers and witches. And I can read demons—which, ew, usually not very pleasant. Do you have any idea
what flits through a Po’gh’anti’s brain? But I can’t read you at all. You’re just a great big blank to me.” He smiled in triumph.

Spike frowned and ran his fingers through his short hair, as if he were trying to massage some thoughts loose. If he was successful, Xander couldn’t tell because he heard nothing except Rocko’s impatient and pitiful little breakfast whine.

“Maybe it’s because you’re dead,” Xander offered. “I’m a little unclear on the whole vampire physiology thing, but I guess if you don’t have a pulse you probably don’t have electrical activity in your brain. How do you work, Spike?”

Spike looked slightly alarmed, as if he thought Xander intended to take him apart and see what made him tick. “Dunno, do I? Just ... am. And I definitely think!”

“Occasionally,” Xander teased, which earned him a half-hearted glare. “Look, we could probably ask
Giles and he could probably give us a dissertation on the subject, but in the end the reason doesn’t matter. You’re not in my head, Spike. And that means if you still want to, you can stay. Shake the dust off your travelin' boots and ... and mosey a while in Werleyville.”

Finally, Spike stopped looking confused. Instead, he smiled widely. “Only if you promise to give the cowboy lingo a rest.”

Xander patted Spike’s blanket-covered knee. “Sure thing, pardner.” Then he stood and went to prepare toast and kibble.

Part Three

Spike was still tired. Xander understood—it wasn’t exactly vampire hours. So Xander suggested that Spike move upstairs to the bed, where he’d probably be more comfortable and where he wouldn’t be disturbed as Xander puttered around. Spike nodded and yawned again. Then he stood, letting the blanket drop away completely. He
smirked at Xander, scooped his clothing off the floor, and walked up the stairs. Xander watched appreciatively. He’d seen Spike naked before but that was years ago, before Xander had admitted his sexual preferences to himself, let alone anyone else. Now he felt like he could ogle freely, and Spike didn’t seem to mind.

For a few hours, Xander did chores. He watered and weeded the garden before it grew too warm outside, while Rocko dug for gophers. When the gardening was done, he decided to tackle the back door, which led from the kitchen to the well. When he’d moved in, there had been no door at all and the frame had been badly warped. He had jury-rigged something just to keep the elements out—a salvaged door cut to fit—but he really wanted something nicer and more weatherproof. He wanted to do it right. So he took the door off the hinges and pulled off the old frame, then spent a happy period measuring and cutting and hammering a frame that was straight and true.

He had been using the bank across the street to
store supplies, so he went there and fetched the brand new door he’d acquired a while back. When he returned to the kitchen he heard water running upstairs and concluded that Spike must be showering. The thought of that distracted him a little, but not so much that he couldn’t hang the new door. He was just testing it when a voice behind him said, “Didn’t realize opening and shutting took so much practice.”

Xander turned around to grin at the vampire, who was leaning in the doorway to the main room. “Only if you want to get really good at it. Wanna give it a shot?”

Spike gestured silently at the windows, which were bathing the room in light.

“Oh,” Xander said. “Sorry. Guess I’m gonna have to rig up some shades or something.”

That seemed to please Spike, because he grinned. He was dressed again, Xander noted with slight disappointment. “Could raise the dead with all the
“clattering you were doing down here,” said Spike.

“Maybe it was time for the dead to get his ass out of bed anyway.” Xander washed his hands at the sink and then turned to look at Spike again. “I’m gonna have some lunch. You want something? I’m fresh out of plasma.”

“I’ve a coolerful in my car. Would you mind?”

“No problem. Just hang on a sec.”

Xander had a rapt audience of two as he made himself a sandwich with some leftover steak and sliced tomatoes. He carried the sandwich and a couple of beers into the main room and set them on the table. “Guard this, will you?” he said to Spike. “Rocko is a thief.”

Sure enough, when Xander came back with a heavy cooler and the black duffel he’d found beside it, Spike was sitting at the table in front of Xander’s lunch, giving Rocko a stern look. Rocko, on the other hand, was trying his damnedest to
convince Spike that his cruel human hadn’t fed him in weeks.

“He does the puppy dog eyes better than you,” Spike said to Xander.

“He has 100% more eye. It’s an unfair advantage.” Xander set Spike’s things on the floor beside the vampire, then sat down and pulled the plate over. He took a big bite and popped open his Coors as he chewed.

Meanwhile, Spike was bent over in his chair, digging around in his cooler. He sat up a moment later with two plastic bags of blood in his hand. “Ice is melting. Can I store the rest in your freezer?”

“No problem. You probably saw already—I have two big freezers.”

“Why?”

Xander shrugged. “So I can stock up. Don’t have to
go into town so often.”

“’T’s really that bad, is it?”

“It really is. It’s like someone jammed a radio in my head and the volume’s turned up way high and the station keeps changing. God, if you knew went on in people’s heads! You see someone standing there—a pretty girl maybe, or a cop or a priest—and you think, They look nice enough. And then you learn the truth.” He shook his head and took another big bite of his lunch.

“And loads of those radio programs are about you.”

“Oh, yeah. My favorite show: What People Really Think about Me.”

Spike shuddered a little. “Wouldn’t much fancy that myself.” He vamped out and used his fangs to rip open one the blood bags, then poured about half of it down his throat.
“Ew,” said Xander.

“Why? Look at that meat you’re tearing into so gleefully. It’s nearly as bloody as my lunch.”

“I like my steaks rare.”

Spike gave an evil grin. “And I always liked my humans rare as well.”

Xander decided it was time to change the subject. “Let’s discuss sleeping arrangements.”

Spike lifted an eyebrow.

“I have plenty of rooms here. Most of ’em aren’t in great shape, but I can fix that pretty easily. The structure’s good, so we’re mainly talking a little sheetrock, few gallons of paint, that kind of thing. Would only take me a few days.”

“Fast with your tools, are you?”

“Let’s just say I know how to use my tools just
right,” Xander replied with a grin. “But that still leaves a furniture issue. I only have the one bed. I guess I could go into town and buy another, but—”

“Yours is big enough for two.”

Spike was poker-faced, and Xander wasn’t sure if Spike’s observation had been meant as a joke, as a simple statement of fact ... or as an offer. He decided a similarly ambiguous response was in order. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll molest you?”

“Actually,” Spike said, “I was rather hoping you would.”

And while Xander sat there, gaping, Spike laughed and drank his remaining blood.

***
Despite Spike’s admission—maybe because of Spike’s admission—no molestation occurred for the next several days. Part of that was due to their differing sleep schedules. Spike slipped into bed long after Xander was fast asleep, and Xander slipped out of bed while Spike was still dreaming away. During the day, Xander worked in the garden and kept his town from falling to pieces, and at night Spike hunted deer—a fresh supplement to his blood bank—and tinkered with his car. Poor Rocko looked kind of overwhelmed with all the decisions he had to make about whose shadow to be. But for a couple hours in the evening they all crashed together on the couch and made fun of bad TV, and that was enjoyable. It had been a while since Xander had enjoyed just hanging out with someone.

Spike was different than Xander remembered. Oh, the snark was still there and he still called Xander a lot of names that might or might not have been obscene, but there was no real malice behind it. It was just two friends teasing one another good-
naturally. Xander wasn’t sure if Spike had mellowed because of his experiences or if it was the lack of an audience that allowed him to smooth his rough edges a little. In either case, it turned out that he knew a lot of things about a wide range of subjects and he could be easily coaxed into telling tales of his past. He was like a walking history book, only way, way sexier.

“Are chickens hard to keep?” Xander asked him one evening during a commercial for toothpaste.

“What?”

“Chickens. You know, cluck-cluck. Are they a lot of work? Do you need special poultry-wrangling skills? ’Cause I was thinking fresh eggs would be nice.”

“How would I bloody know?”

“You’re old. People grew their own chickens in olden days.”
Spike looked at him as if Xander were insane. “Not people who lived in Belgravia, berk. We got our eggs at the market. Well, the servants got the eggs at the market.”

“Servants. Huh.” Xander pictured Spike in a vest and tails, ordering people around, toasting the Queen, maybe planning an outing to Ascot or debating which country the British should imperialize next. Xander giggled.

Spike reached over Rocko to poke Xander in the side. “Tosser.”

Xander retaliated by tossing popcorn at Spike, which caused Rocko to scramble into Spike’s lap to retrieve the treats, and that made Xander laugh so hard he almost fell off the couch.

Somehow by the time Xander caught his breath again, Rocko was in Spike’s spot and Spike was on Xander’s lap. Straddling him, in fact, so their crotches were inches apart and Spike’s breath was soft on Xander’s face. Xander went very still, but
Spike ran his fingers through Xander’s long hair. “Could cut this for you,” Spike said quietly.

“I wasn’t aware that you were a licensed barber.” Xander’s voice came out sounding slightly choked.

“Been cutting my own for over a century—and that without a mirror to help.”

Without quite intending to, Xander reached up and caressed Spike’s hair, which was in a stage somewhere between bristles and curls. It was softer than he expected. Spike was still detangling Xander with his fingers.

“Spike—” Xander began.

“Perhaps I should leave your hair long. We could braid it, stick a chicken feather in it. With your tan you could pass for a Red Indian.”

Xander decided not to lecture the vampire on his political incorrectness. “Spike—” he began again.
Spike inched his groin closer to Xander’s. “Been waiting for you to molest me. I reckon I’ll have to begin the molesting myself.”

“I thought you were joking,” said Xander. “You’re not even gay.”

It felt interesting when Spike shrugged. The strong muscles of his thighs flexed against Xander’s legs. Spike said, “I like birds well enough, but then so do you. But a bloke now and then … lovely muscles … hard cock …” He moved one of his hands to Xander’s crotch and squeezed lightly, and Xander uttered an involuntary moan. “See? Don’t tell me you’re not interested. I’ve seen you watching me. Even back in that horrible basement, yeah?”

“Uhn,” Xander replied intelligently.

“I never paid you much mind back then. But recently, well, I expect I’ve been watching you as well. You’ve grown up nicely, love. Got the chip off your shoulder, found yourself some confidence
... it sits well on you. Very well indeed.”

Between the compliments and the hand that remained in very intimate contact, Xander’s head was swimming. Then Spike bent down a little and, pushing Xander’s hair behind his ear, began laying butterfly-light kisses along Xander’s temple, just past the missing eye. His touch was so heart-achingly tender that Xander almost cried. He’d pictured sex with Spike plenty of times, but he never imagined it might be soft and sweet.

Wait. Sex with Spike.

Xander’s brain kick-started back into motion and he gently pushed Spike away by the shoulders. “Stop,” he said firmly.

Spike blinked quickly, as if he’d been hit in the face. “Still disgusted by me?”

“No! God no.” Xander steadied himself with a deep breath. “I ... I want you. Christ, you were just feeling me up. You can tell how much I want you.
But ... but there’s something I want even more.”

“What?”

“A friend, Spike. A good friend. Someone to talk to, hang out with. I didn’t have much of that even before the fucking curse and now— You show up and it’s like taking a starving man to the all-you-can-eat buffet. I like you. I may even need you. You’re a good guy and my only real friend and sex always fucks things up. I don’t want to fuck us up with ... with fucking.” Okay, maybe not the most eloquent of speeches, but he was making it with a gorgeous vampire on his lap, which was a major handicap in the rhetoric department. Besides, every word of it was heartfelt.

The hurt faded from Spike’s expressive face; it was followed by shock and then something else. His eyes glittered and he blinked them rapidly. “Mates, yeah? I’ve never really ...” he cleared his throat. “Never really had a mate before. Not even when I was human.”
Shit. Now Xander really was going to cry. He tried to stop it with a lame joke. “I’m kinda inexperienced too, but I don’t think buddies sit in each other’s laps too often.”

Spike exhaled loudly, kissed Xander once more on the forehead, and dismounted. He shoved Rocko into the middle of the couch and collapsed onto the cushion. Then he smiled. “A really good mate would run and fetch us a beer.”

***

Somehow, the just-friends thing worked pretty well, despite the shared bed. It was a big bed. Rocko slept between them and they pretended he was an impenetrable barrier—a canine Sierra Nevada.

Not that Xander didn’t have to jack off every day
or two. He had a system for it. When the sun was nice and bright and high in the sky, he would sneak furtively off to the big building at the end of Main Street farthest from the mermaid fountain. Xander was pretty sure the building had once been a bordello, with a small opium den off to one side. It was Werleyville’s red light district.

Not much remained of the interior, only tantalizing hints of the building’s former life, but Xander could close his eye and pretend he heard jangly piano music and smelled cheap perfume and sweet smoke. He’d even cleared a space for himself in the dusty rubble and scattered a few throw pillows there. The pillows were from Pier 1, but he would lie on them and imagine they came from somewhere exotic, carried across deserts on camelback and over perilous oceans by sailing ships, then hauled to his mountain town by mules. He would imagine a room full of miners and desperados, of whores and jaded city slickers. And then he’d imagine a man entering the place; not too tall and more wiry than muscular, but with a thousand-mile stare in his blue eyes and a sense
of quiet power in every prowling step. The man would slowly make his way to Xander, who had found himself in desperate straits through no fault of his own, and who was doing what he must to stay alive in a hard, cruel world.

“Haven’t seen you here before,” the man would say. Somehow the English accent wouldn’t clash with the cowboy hat and spurs, and the gun belt would be an extra sexy model.

“I’m new,” Xander would reply, feigning shyness. Customers liked that.

The man would squat beside him and look at him carefully. “They call me Spike. And not ’cause I work on the railroad. You?” His leer was stunningly handsome.

“Xander.”

“Xander.” Spike would savor the name on his tongue, like whiskey. “I like that.” And he’d reach down to stroke Xander’s hair. “You’re dark.
Injun?"

“I don’t know. I was an orphan.” Maybe it was petty, but Xander always got a perverse pleasure out of killing off Tony and Jessica in his fantasies.

More stroking. “Poor boy.”

Kissing would follow. Greedy, possessive kissing with some groping thrown in for good measure. Spike would pull away, breathless, and run a finger along Xander’s swollen bottom lip. “That’s quite a mouth you have on you.”

“You don’t know the half of it, mister.”

And then clothing would be torn off with wild abandon—at this point in the fantasy the real Xander would have his jeans and boxers pushed down to his knees—and neither of them would care about the cowpokes and whores and outlaws and miners in the room, because now their universe was just the two of them.
“Ride me,” Spike would say, or sometimes Xander would say it. And there was no need for condoms in the Wild West, so riding would commence. Xander would groan and Spike would howl. And in a dusty wreck of a building in a ghost town in the middle of nowhere, Xander would come.

He kept rags there to clean himself. And then he would zip up his jeans and go back out into the sun, and he’d spend a couple of hours getting dirty and sweaty at various chores, hoping the grime would mask the smell of what he’d done.

Sometimes he wondered if Spike was secretly beating off to fantasies about Xander.

Of course he realized that “just friends” did not masturbate to fantasies about one another. But it was the best compromise he could reach, and maybe it would work. When he and Spike were together in the evenings, they had good, wholesome fun. Well, okay, maybe there was too much alcohol and swearing involved for wholesomeness, but there was no sex involved.
Sometimes their fingers would brush as they handed off the remote or a fresh can of beer. But otherwise they didn't even share a kiss.

Rocko sat between them on the couch, seemingly content. But sometimes he’d raise his head and stare at Xander, and Xander would almost swear the dog was thinking, *Hey, moron. I’m the one who’s neutered. If you don’t make a move on the vamp soon we might as well take you to Doc Adamson too.*

Although the weather was gradually turning a little cooler, the leaves hadn’t yet shed their green and the days were still mighty long. Spike grew restless in the late afternoons and early evenings. So Xander took to finding projects to do in the saloon; there was always something. Spike would skulk around the edges, telling stories and critiquing Xander’s skills, and after a couple weeks, the vampire began to join in the work. Xander soon learned that Spike didn’t know what the hell he was doing. Engines he was familiar with, but that was about it. Xander taught him
how to plan a project and prepare the materials, how to use a power drill and a miter saw and a Dremel, how to put it all together so that little pieces of nothing became something. Xander warned him to be careful of the pointy wooden parts.

Xander went online and ordered supplies. He had to drive to town to pick them up, but when he returned home—a bit frazzled by all the voices—they had tile and mortar and grout and even some fancy light fixtures. He and Spike spent a happy week or so finishing the saloon’s sole bathroom.

“’T’s nice,” Spike said, looking at the room when they’d finished. “Like something in a magazine.”

“Yep.”

Spike looked at his own hands, turning them back and forth as if he’d never seen them before. “These helped make it,” he said with wonder. “Helped create … beauty. Instead of shite. Instead of mayhem.”
Xander wanted to draw Spike into his arms. Instead he gave him a brotherly pat on the shoulder. “Yeah. They really did.”

Spike gave him a blinding smile. “I’ve some ideas about what we might do with the kitchen now.”

***

“Xander? Xander, come here!”

Xander was in the bank sorting through lengths of wood when he heard Spike’s agitated call. He dropped his tape measure and rushed out, across Main Street, and into the saloon. Spike was bending over the couch and Xander couldn’t see what the problem was. But as he got farther into the room he saw Rocko lying on his side, immobile on the couch cushions.
“What happened?” Xander cried as he rushed to Spike. Rocko’s tail thumped, but weakly.

Spike shook his head. “Dunno. He wouldn’t eat his breakfast. Did you feed him already?”

“No. He didn’t get up when I did this morning. I thought he was just being lazy.”

“He followed me downstairs, but slowly. Didn’t even leave the porch to piss. And he wouldn’t eat. I reckoned maybe he’d had a bit too much biscuit last night—or perhaps those pieces of hamburger I saw you sneaking him under the table—and I let it be. But he’s been so quiet. And now he’ll barely move.” Spike was petting Rocko gently as he spoke, and Xander realized that the vampire was genuinely distressed.

Xander pushed in a little closer. He didn’t see anything obviously wrong—no blood or anything—but Rocko’s eyes weren’t right. He looked like he was in pain.
“I’m gonna take him to the vet,” he announced.

“In town?”

“Well, Werleyville’s last vet probably died when you did, so yeah.”

“Sorry I can’t do this for you, Xan.”

Xander nodded his thanks. He carefully scooped Rocko into his arms—the damned dog was heavy—and carried him to the door. Spike watched from the safety of the porch as Xander placed Rocko on the passenger seat of the truck and then pulled away.

The drive seemed very long, and as he approached the town, the voices in his head seemed louder and more strident than ever. Rocko just lay there, curled in a miserable ball, not trying to stick his nose out the window or poke around under the seat for food wrappers as he usually did.
Dr. Adamson had a receptionist, a chubby girl with red hair in a messy ponytail, who ran to get the vet as soon as she saw Xander push the door open. Dr. Adamson emerged from the back just a moment later. “This way,” he ordered, and Xander followed him into the exam room and set Rocko down on the table. The vet immediately began to prod the dog. “What happened?”

Xander explained as Dr. Adamson continued his examination, and he tried to remain calm as he picked up the vet’s thought: *This poor mutt's in bad shape*. Bombarded by the doctor's impressions and assessments, Xander knew the diagnosis before Dr. Adamson said it out loud: “I think he may have swallowed more rocks. He probably has an intestinal blockage. We’ll have to x-ray to be sure.”

“And ... and if he does?”

“Surgery. Right away.” *And*—he didn’t add but Xander heard—*the prognosis is definitely iffy.*
Xander stayed in the waiting room, pacing and worrying, while the doctor operated. The receptionist seemed to feel really bad for him and suggested that he go down the street to Mo’s and have a coffee or something, but he thanked her and refused. At least in the clinic he had fewer people to listen to, and he could eavesdrop on Rocko’s progress.

At long last Dr. Adamson emerged. Again, Xander knew the outcome before the vet spoke. A few pounds of stones had been removed, along with a length of dead intestine. “The prognosis is guarded,” Dr. Adamson said. Poor guy has a fifty-fifty chance at best. “Go home and get some rest. We’ll have a better sense of things tomorrow.”

Since he was in town anyway, Xander stopped at the grocery store and stocked up on his usual. It was strange not to see Rocko waiting impatiently for him. Even the cashier wondered where his dog was.
It was dark by the time he pulled up in front of the saloon. Spike came sprinting out, then looked stricken when he saw that the passenger seat was empty. “How …”

“He ate more rocks. Surgery. We’ll know more tomorrow, but … it’s not looking very good.” Xander said it all emotionlessly and then climbed out of the cab and began to unload bags.

“You bought groceries?” Spike asked with astonishment. “Rocko’s just hanging on and you went shopping?”

Xander brushed past him and made his way into the saloon. “We were running low.”

Spike stood in the main room and watched silently—not helping—as Xander brought the groceries inside and put them away. When Xander was done with that task he simply stood, hands at his sides, completely at a loss of what to do next.

Spike parked himself in front of Xander. His arms
were crossed on his chest. “Shopping?”

And Xander began to cry. Big, horrible sobs, the kind that made his nose start to run and blinded his eye with tears. He probably would have fallen to his knees but Spike caught him, held him in strong arms, crooned in his ear. “ ‘T’s all right. ‘T’s all right, love. It’ll be fine.”

“It won’t!” Xander wailed miserably, as mortified over his breakdown as he was distressed over his dog.

But Spike stroked his back and led him to the couch, and then he magically produced an actual handkerchief and let Xander blow his nose with it, and didn’t even make horrible faces about the disgusting mess.

Eventually Xander caught his breath again. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“ ‘S all right. You love the ugly mutt.”
Xander sniffed. “Yeah. But ... Christ. I didn’t break down like that when Anya died, or Joyce, or Jesse, or ...”

Spike reached up and stroked Xander’s cheek with his thumb. “But it adds up, doesn’t it? The grief.”

Only then did Xander realize that Spike had been crying as well. Not as spectacularly, but tear-tracks still glistened on his skin and his eyes were red-rimmed. Xander flung his arms around him.

And that was all, really. Except that night Spike went to bed when Xander did, and with no dog between them on the mattress they moved close together. They didn’t have sex. Didn’t even kiss. Just held each other, comfortingly close.

Part Four

“You can put the mobile down, Xander. It’ll still work.”
“I know.” But he kept the phone clutched in his hands, staring fixedly at the blank screen. He’d already called Dr. Adamson’s office three times, and each time the receptionist said that Rocko was still really groggy but hanging in there. The vet would call him with any news, she said. Still, Xander was considering calling again.

Spike walked over to the table and placed a hand on Xander’s shoulder. “Go mend something. It’ll take your mind off things.”

“No it won’t.”

“Then at least eat something.”

“Not hungry.”

Spike sighed and knelt beside him, positioning himself so that Xander had to look in his face. “Pet, you’ll make yourself ill.”

“So what. I should get sick. It’s my fault.”
“How is it your fault? Not as if you dumped gravel in the daft dog’s dish, is it?”

“No. But he’s mine and I knew he liked rocks and—”

“Xander. Stop.” Spike cupped Xander’s face with his palms. “You are not responsible for the rest of the world. You do your best and that’s bloody good, better than most would manage, and you can’t be blamed when things go pear-shaped. Things will go pear-shaped. That’s the way of the world, innit?”

Xander didn’t believe a word of it, but Spike was comforting him and that was awfully nice. Xander doubted that Spike had much experience at it, but he was clearly making an effort. So Xander nodded.

Spike stood and slapped his shoulder. “There you go, mate. Why don’t you show me how to work that machine you were messing about with the other day?”
“You want to learn to use a router?”

“Young my unlife’s desire. C’mon.”

So Xander spent the next couple of hours upstairs in the bedroom working on the dresser, teaching a vampire how to shape molding with a Roman ogee edge. And although the cloud of worry didn’t evaporate from over Xander’s head, his distress was decreased. They touched each other as they worked: nothing sexual, but a guiding hand on an arm, a congratulatory pat on the back, a flick of a finger to tuck stray hairs behind Xander’s ear. Every time they made contact Xander felt a little stronger, as if Spike were a battery from which he could be recharged.

When the phone finally rang, Xander picked it up and stared in horror, unable to answer. Spike huffed and grabbed it out of his hand.

“Hello? … No, this is his mate. How’s the mutt? … Yeah … Yeah … Right then. Cheers.” Spike ended
the call and handed the phone to Xander. His face was emotionless.

Xander wanted to strangle him. “What? What did he say?”

Spike’s face split into a grin. “He’ll be fine. You can fetch him now if you like.”

Xander whooped and threw his arms around Spike. Then he thundered out of the room and down the stairs. Spike followed at a more sedate pace.

“Don’t get in a wreck on the way,” Spike called as Xander flung the front door open. Xander shot him a grin and sprinted for the truck.

People’s stray thoughts still intruded as Xander drove down the highway and into town. But perhaps due to his overwhelming relief about Rocko, the floating bits of mental detritus didn't grate quite as much as usual. When he got to the clinic, he picked up on the fact that the
receptionist thought his obvious concern about his dog was adorable, and that Doc Abramson was genuinely tickled to be able to give good news. He didn’t appear to think that Xander was to blame for the rocks either.

Rocko looked a little unsteady on his pins and he had a Frankenstein-like scar on his abdomen. Plus he was wearing one of those ridiculous plastic collars, the kind that looked like satellite dishes. But he grinned at Xander and wagged his tail madly, and that was good enough for Xander.

The bill was astronomical, especially when the receptionist added the costs of the special canned food that Rocko was going to have to eat for a while. Xander didn’t care. There was a printed page of instructions that he'd study later, but for now, he thanked the vet and led his dog to the parking lot. He lifted Rocko carefully onto the seat.

Spike was waiting for him in the shade of the saloon porch. But this time he was smiling widely,
and Xander had to hold Rocko’s collar to keep the
dog from running ahead and leaping up the stairs.
When they got to Spike, the vampire lifted the dog
into his arms and nuzzled at his neck, calling him a
berk and wally and pillock and a lot of other
names that made Rocko’s tail wag.

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Rocko healed quickly, which was good because he
kept bonking into things with that stupid collar.
Spike removed the stitches himself. Rocko still had
to be watched carefully because his near-death
experience hadn’t dulled his taste for granite and
limestone. Spike spent three weeks teaching the
dog to play dead in response to a flash of vampire
fangs. Spike seemed to think the new trick was
uproariously funny; Xander was amused too but
pretended to be appalled.
The dog slept between them in bed.

The hours of sunlight grew shorter. The trees turned glorious reds and oranges and yellows and the nights were nippy enough that Xander threw another blanket on the bed, but the days remained pleasantly warm. Xander ended up with way too many tomatoes and a truckload of zucchini. He didn’t know why he’d planted the zucchini anyway; he hated the stuff. Needless to say, Spike wouldn’t eat squash either. Xander left it near the edge of town in hopes that the deer would take it.

Spike seemed to grow restless, disappearing earlier in the evening and staying out longer, which worried Xander. Maybe his roommate had grown tired of Werleyville’s limited charms. Maybe Spike was thinking of moving on. The very concept was enough to make Xander nauseous and he wasn’t brave enough to ask Spike what was going on.

And then one evening, just as the sun set, Spike
stood up from the couch and stretched. “Going into town,” he announced.

“But we don’t need any groceries.” One of the advantages of the earlier arrival of night was that Spike could get into town before the stores closed and do Xander’s errands for him.

“Not going for food,” Spike responded. He pulled on his duster and Rocko ran to the door and looked at him hopefully. But Spike shook his head. “Stay here,” he commanded and shut the door in Rocko’s face.

Xander and his dog looked mournfully at one another. Xander wanted to go upstairs and see if Spike’s duffel was still stuffed in the closet, but he was too chicken. He pretended to watch *So You Think You Can Dance* instead.

Spike returned several hours later. Rocko heard the car first and barked madly; Xander remained on the couch and tried to look nonchalant. It seemed to take an inordinately long time for Spike
to enter the saloon. When he did, he was grinning like the Cheshire cat.

“Where’s the groceries?” Xander asked.

“Told you. Wasn’t going for food.”

“Then what were you going for?”

Spike grinned. “Come here and see.”

Rocko had already settled himself back on the couch. He gave them a look that expressed his opinion of people who went marching around when they should be sleeping, then he closed his eyes and sighed. Xander followed Spike out the door and down Main Street.

“Where are we going?” Xander demanded.

Spike didn’t answer, which was irritating. But really, it wasn’t as if there were that many possible destinations in Werleyville, so Xander kept his mouth shut and trotted along at Spike’s
They stopped in front of the bordello. Spike opened the door and ushered Xander in; Xander hesitantly stepped inside.

The place had been cleaned up. It wasn’t in pristine condition, but the rubble had been cleared away and the floor swept clean. A few throw rugs were scattered here and there, as were a half dozen or so kerosene lanterns. The lanterns flickered a little, illuminating a bottle and glasses that had been placed atop a slightly wobbly table and a phonograph—an honest to God phonograph—in one corner. And an enormous pile of throw pillows.

Xander turned to stare at Spike, eyebrows raised high. “What ...”

“Hang on.” Spike strode across the room and spent a few moments putting a record on the phonograph. Music began to play—something suitably old-fashioned with violins and things. It
didn’t seem at all Spikish, but it was kind of ... romantic.

“Spike?” Xander said.

Smug and nervous were warring across Spike’s face. “Stay here,” he ordered. “Can sit if you fancy it. I’ll be right back.” And he ducked into the side room that had once been the opium den. Xander heard vague rustlings in there and some muted swearing, but had no idea what was going on. He walked over and inspected the little table. It was handmade, a couple of the cut edges still a little raw. Spike must have fashioned it himself.

Bemused, Xander sat atop the pile of cushions. He recalled all the fantasies he’d entertained in this very spot and his cheeks flamed with a furious blush. As if it had been trained to do so, his cock stirred and grew half hard.

And then Spike made his entrance and Xander’s cock was suddenly hard as rock.
Spike was wearing a Stetson. It was tilted forward, half-obscuring his face but exposing the stark relief of his cheekbones. His pale arms and torso were bare. He wore a pair of chaps on his legs, the leather a dark brown that was almost black. And he wore nothing else.

“Guh,” said Xander.

Spike’s cock was as erect as his. The vampire prowled toward him, hips swinging dangerously, lips curled in a half smile.

Xander was completely paralyzed.

When Spike reached the pile of pillows, he stopped and looked down at Xander. “Howdy, pardner,” he said.

“Spike. I …uh …” Xander tried to remember how to speak English. “Just friends, remember?” His voice sounded desperately squeaky.

Spike kept his left hip cocked and his voice deep
and gravelly. “Friends are lovely. But you want more than that, don’t you?”

“I … I …”

“Haven’t you been thinking of me when you’ve been tossing off in here?”

Xander couldn’t bring himself to lie about it, so he nodded wordlessly. He blushed again while he was at it.

“Were you imagining me anything like this?”

Another nod.

“Isn’t the real thing better?” A note of pleading entered his voice. “Xan, I want you just as badly. I dream of you every night. Of what it would be like to have the heat of you inside me, to taste you, to make you forget about fantasies and curses and old sorrows and just feel me.”

“Oh God,” Xander moaned. His cock had no
doubts at all what it wanted. But his mind ... “Jesus, Spike. I want ... But if I lost you as a friend—as my only friend—I couldn’t, I couldn’t ...”

Spike crouched down, which put him and his bare skin very close, but he didn’t touch Xander. “You won’t. ‘M not talking about a quick shag, pet. Don’t want that myself. Be my lover, Xander. Be my love. Please.”

Xander imagined himself traveling back in time and finding his sixteen-year-old self. He imagined telling himself that someday he would be reclining on pillows in a ghost town, one-eyed and psychic, and Spike would be in front of him in half a cowboy outfit, proposing to him. And then he imagined informing his teenaged self that he intended to say yes.

“You bought chaps,” he said. “And pillows. You found mood music. And you made a table.” He was feeling more than a little dazed.
“It’s wonky.”

“It’s perfect.”

Spike smiled hugely.

And maybe it was the beauty of that smile or the flawlessness of his form in the flickering light. Maybe it was because they moved into one another’s arms and Spike was kissing along Xander’s jawline. But probably it was because Xander remembered Spike holding a hanky for him when Xander lost it over Rocko, and he pictured Spike carefully building his crooked little table. He pulled away slightly so he could look Spike in the eyes. “You have to promise me … if you need something from me, if there’s something I’m not doing right … you have to tell me, okay? Let me fix it instead of screwing things up.”

Spike nodded solemnly. “’T’s precisely what I want too, pet. You read my mind.”
Xander began to laugh—a good, honest laugh. The kind that cleared his lungs and cleared his mind. And Spike joined in until they had collapsed on the pillows together, tears of mirth running from their eyes. Xander was suddenly, wildly, giddily optimistic, more glass-half-fullish than the founders of Werleyville had ever been, and he knew this thing with Spike was absolutely going to work.

The End