

Rating: R

Disclaimer: Jinkies!

Concrit/Feedback: Like, sure, Scoob!

Notes/Spoilers/Warnings: Set pre BtVS S4, in Oxnard, from whence it goes AU.

Summary: Xander spent a summer in Oxnard, at the Fabulous Ladies Night Club. My take on how it coulda went.

How I Spent My Summer Vacation

by
Beetle

Part One

June 28th

“Well, well, well.”

I’d just stepped out the kitchen exit of the *Fabulous Ladies Night Club* with a bag of garbage, when a shadow detached itself from the shadowy bulk of the dumpsters

and flowed toward me

Holy. Shit. My first eloquent, not to mention useful thought on hearing that unfortunately familiar voice. I'd like to say I whirled around with two stakes at the ready, an expectant grin on my face.

I'd like to say I was all Dirty Harry, like "You feel lucky? Well. . . do ya, vamp!"

Yeah--screw that, I was just glad I didn't wet myself, 'cause I'd drunk about a gallon of water throughout the shift and I had to piss like a racehorse.

Swaggering unevenly toward me, duster flapping, ice-white hair glinting, was one-quarter of the Scourge of Europe.

The evil fiend who bashed me over the head with a microscope.

"Imagine my surprise when I picked up a familiar scent in this shithole club. Thought maybe you had a long-lost twin, or summat . . . but it's you, alright," he slurred, closing the distance between us till my back was against the grungy kitchen exit. The bag of garbage--not so much

a weapon as an anti-weapon--dropped from my hand with an undignified squish. "The Slayer's boy."

Spike braced his hands on the door, to either side of my head and leaned in till all I could see was his eyes. Words like *thrall* and *hypnotize* danced across the backs of my eyes as he frowned thoughtfully. "Xander . . . somethin'-or-other. . . ."

How do you know that when it comes to the great action movie that is life, you're nothing more than the comic relief? When your arch-nemeses don't bother to remember your last name, that's how.

"Harris," I muttered as Spike got up in my face. Underneath the smell of garbage and piss--*way* underneath--I could smell leather and smoke and Jack Daniels. I'm not gonna say that made me all light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel . . . I was still firmly in the that-light's-a-big-ol'-train camp, but my odds of surviving this night had increased a tiny bit. "Xander *Harris*."

"Ah." Spike seemed weirdly polite, possibly because he was so blitzed. But he obviously didn't care what my last name was. Which makes sense, because I'd never cared what a Twinkie's last name was either, before I ate it. "So

what's an impressionable lad like you doin' in a den of iniquity like this, hmm, Xanderrr Harrris?"

Don't ask *me* how he hissed his Rs. Maybe it's a British-thing. I know it's not a vamp-thing.

"Just thought I'd do something original the summer before college. Forget back-packing through Europe or a Great North America Roadtrip, nossir! I decided to be a scullery-boy, in a strip club in the asshole of California--"

At least that was what my mouth was saying. My brain was saying something else.

He's not listening to me. He's not buying any of this and he's not listening to me. He's watching my neck like it's pay-per-view and licking his lips, but not so much with the listening. Oh, this isn't good. This isn't good at all, nope, gonna die out here tonight, back by the dumpsters like a stray dog--

My mouth:

"--good old UC Sunnydale. Sure, it'll be a heavy course-load, double-majoring in business administration *and* accounting, but I'm really gonna buckle down and go for

the gusto--”

My brain:

Eeeeeeeeeekkkkkkkk!!!!!! Vampire!!!!!!

“Mm, fascinating,” Spike broke into my babble, nodding thoughtfully. Then he switched to gameface. “I’m hungry, Xanderrr HARRIS, and *you* smell like Sunday-brunch. Whatcha think ‘bout that, pet?”

He stepped even closer to me and leaned in to sniff my neck; again, it was so fast, one moment I’m looking into merciless gold eyes, the next I’ve got a cool nose pressed against my neck and nuzzling me. His hands were only a little warmer and they clamped on my upper arms just tight enough to squash any illusions of breaking free.

“Uh . . . invade my personal space, much?” My voice was weak and about eight octaves too high as his lips brushed my skin. “The S-slayer--”

“Isn’t here for you to hide behind, so don’t embarrass yourself, boy.” He inhaled deeply; the rush of air on my sweaty skin made me shiver. “Bloody hell, you smell divine.”

And that was so funny, for a moment, I forgot my predicament and laughed.

“You think sweat and au de dish detergent is divine? Man, you’re so drunk!”

“Smell like sunshine and life, fears and regrets . . . and chocolate.”

“I--chocolate?” Guess you really *are* what you eat.

“Mmhmm.” Something cool and wet rasped across my skin. I shivered again when I realized it was his tongue. I knew I was about to die. “The really good kind . . . bitter-sweet and dark.”

“Um--my scent is very misleading. You would *think* I'd taste good, but in actuality I'm very bland, and unappetizing--”

Vampires don't need to breathe, but I could feel his breath on my neck. “Find that hard to believe. I'll bet you're a real nummy treat.”

“No-no-no!” I didn't wanna die like one of those ensigns

in *Star Trek*. Those bright-eyed, nameless young guys wearing shoot-me-dead red shirts . . . you know the ones. They always got phasered by Klingons, or eaten by giant blobs during away-missions with Kirk. “I taste really, really bad! Like moldy lima beans and rancid peanuts!”

“Be a good little nummy, and I’ll make it nice for you,” he whispered, and I felt the prick of sharp, cool fangs. . . .

“Oh, damn,” I whimpered. This was it. This was the grisly end. I only hoped it’d be quick and painless. Or at least non-torture-y.

Oh shit oh fuck gonna die gonna be drained by evil-bizzaro Billy Idol never even been to Disneyland why isn’t my life flashing before your eyes I’m about to die but all I’m seeing is the stuff I never got to do never woulda done anyway I’m such a loser--

“Christ, boy, don’t you ever stop yammering?” Spike asked, straightening up to glare at me. But he sounded exasperated and kinda amused. “Even imminent death isn’t enough to shut your bloody cakehole!”

Had I said that out loud?

Gameface melted away and Spike rolled his eyes. “Unless I’m suddenly psychic, you did.”

“Did I just say *that* out loud, too?”

“Tosser.” The hands on my arms shoved me once, not too hard, but hard enough the back of my head bonked against the wall.

“Ow! Hey!” I was angry, and ready to give my soon-to-be devourer a piece of my mind, but when the stars and exploding flowers faded--

I was alone.

I didn’t waste any time. I yanked the door open and stepped into the safety of the kitchen, panting and shaking. Then stood in the doorway, scanning up and down the empty alley until Mr. Anastasio barked at me to get my ass back inside and take care of my station.

I was actually grateful to get back to stacks and stacks of dirty dishes.

But not before a much needed bathroom run.

July 2

He was back a few nights later, just after close.

Paco was taking his last smoke-break out back. I was elbows-deep in warm sudsy water, thinking about how neat independent wealth would be, when:

“So, nummy, this is the *best* summer job you could find?”

“Aha!” It was as close to a Slayer-esque pun as I could get. I whirled around, two stakes--hastily carved, wet and soapy, but still perfectly serviceable--at the ready, and there he was. Spike. William the Bloody. One-quarter of the Scourge of Europe. The Microscope Menace.

“Weren’t expecting me to be armed, were ya?”

“Can’t say I was, no,” he said, his relaxed stance not changing in response to the grave threat I’m sure I posed. He was smirking like I wasn’t holding his timely doom in my hands, but I wasn’t about to let that deter me. “You look bloody ridiculous, by the way.”

“Let’s hear you say that when you’re a big pile of dust, Bleach-boy!” I tried to leap forward heroically--and kept

sliding because Paco never wrings out the mop carefully. There were always puddles all over the kitchen floor and damnit! That was the *third time* I'd slipped that *night*!

Spike moved, like a black-and-white blur, out of my way. The stakes went flying out of my hands; good thing, too, 'cause I probably would've landed on them and killed myself. As it was, I hit the floor with a thud that knocked all the air out of me.

"Pretty pathetic, that," my nemesis noted from somewhere above and behind me.

"Wow . . . who says you can't die from humiliation. . . ?" I panted, not even rolling over to face my death. I had no problem dying with my eyes closed and on my belly. I didn't want the last thing I saw to be Spike's *neener-neener-neener!* face.

"Huh . . . not bad."

"I'm flat on my face and you think so?" The floor tasted kinda funny, so I rolled over, my eyes still closed.

"Not *you*. *You're* a bloody catastrophe, pet. I meant these stakes. Could make a living carving things. Probably a

better one than you're making now," he chided, with just a hint of tsk.

"Great--just great. Even my devourer feels the need to point out how badly I'm screwing up my life. Beautiful." I risked opening my eyes. Spike was leaning back against the sink, examining my stakes critically, his hair gel-less, and glowing perfectly white in the fluorescent lighting. He was wearing his trademark black duster, red silk shirt and sprayed on jeans.

"Not here to devour you, mate. Or torture you, or whatever thoughts are going on behind those pretty, dark eyes." Spike turns his laser-beam gaze on me. "Tell me, how've you been?"

"What? Since the last time we hung out, and you tried to cave my skull in with a piece of lab equipment?"

The scarred left eyebrow went up, as if to say *yeah*.

"Um. . . fine?" Then what he said hit me. "Hey, my eyes aren't pretty, they're manly!"

"Are they, now?" That sneer implied otherwise. I felt obliged to defend the masculinity of my eyes and the rest

of me, though I hadn't done the greatest job of it, so far.

"That's right, Soulless; *damn* manly!"

He snorted and tossed the stakes back at me. One hit my chest, the other my crotch. Slay-side down.

"Hey--hey! Kill me, but please don't castrate me!"

"If I was trying to castrate you, nummy, you'd be singing soprano right now. And I'm not gonna kill you, either. Come on." Spike stepped closer to me and offered his hand. When I didn't make a move to take it, he rolled his eyes impatiently. "Better get up before that Anastasio wanker comes in here and sacks you for gold-bricking."

A moment of hesitation and I sat up, taking Spike's hand. Call me crazy, but it seemed like a bad idea to make a soulless psychopath think I was being ungrateful.

And I figured Spike wouldn't take ungratefulness too well, either.

"You worrying about my job security is as touching as it is creepy," I muttered. Spike pulled me up so fast, I almost rebounded off him, which knocked the breath out of me

for the second time that night. He caught me by the arms and held me up . . . held me close.

I made the mistake of looking into his eyes--very, very blue--and forgot all about breathing. Not in the stopping sense, but in the thrall-thrall-must-look-away sense. But I couldn't. There was gold in them thar blue depths, winking sedately like sunken treasure.

"Should be more careful, pet," he said, smirking, stroking my biceps calmingly. "Don't want you gettin' all banged up."

He was solid, warm . . . kinda smelled like copper. . . .

He'd just eaten.

"Oh, Jesus!" So much for the thrall. I tried to jerk away from him but he gripped one of my arms like a vice and wrapped his other arm around my waist. He was still smirking, but it was--fond smirking, which was much, much wiggier than gameface.

"You shouldn't work yourself up so, love. I'm not here to hurt you."

“Then just lemme go and get outta here before you really *do* get me fired!”

“No.”

“C’mon!” I couldn’t shake him loose and trying was getting me nowhere. I groaned, and risked looking into his eyes again. Still blue. Still . . . thrall-y. The last of my struggles tapered off without any permission from my AWOL brain. “Look, I’m a loser, okay? So not worth the thralling, or subverting, or whatever it is you’re doing. Please, let me go--leave me alone.”

“Can’t. See, I’m in the market for a Consort, Xanderrr . . . and you’re in the running. In the bloody lead,” he added, his eyes getting closer and closer. “Think you might be interested?”

“C-consort?” I stammered, wracking my brain for what that meant.

“Didn’t feature runnin’ into any of you white hats *here*, of all places. Gotta figure something put you in my path for a reason.”

Yeah, and the something? Would be Jack Daniels, I

thought, but was still smart enough to not say. “But--you’re evil!”

“Well, you’re not nearly as slow as you put on, are you?” There goes the sneer. But even without it, I know sarcasm when I hear it. No way was I gonna ask him what the hell a Consort was if I was gonna get the eyebrow of ‘you simpleton’ for my trouble.

Anyway, I was pretty sure Consort was a step above minion, or Slayer-bait, and didn’t involve death or soul-loss. Something like a jumped-up side-kick. Either way, evil incarnate was offering me a *job*. “Uh . . . you’re kidding me, right--?”

More winky gold light in his eyes. “Well, it doesn’t carry the same cachet of glamour that dishwashing and hauling trash does, but the pay’s excellent.”

“Wait a minute--there’s *pay*?” I asked, which was stupid. I should’ve been screaming my head off, or at least pretending I was noble enough not to be curious about the wages of sin. “How much?”

“Monetarily? Dunno, exactly. . . .” Spike purred lazily and pulled me flush against him. There was either a gun in his

pocket or he was *really* happy to see me. “But I can promise you great personal satisfaction.”

And suddenly I was remembering what being a Consort entailed--at least according to Giles’s huge and dusty old books.

“Guh!” For once my mouth stopped working as soon as my brain did. “I--”

“You?” Spike was staring at my mouth, his tongue curled over his teeth.

“--am gay. I mean *not* gay! *So* not gay! Love the boobies!” I back-pedaled out of his arms and he let me, not that I was in any way comforted. I was alone with a male vampire who was--luke-warm for my form. Freaking out seemed to be the next logical step, followed by screaming and running out of the kitchen. But before I could, Spike chuckled, all throaty and British, like some kinda Bond villain.

“Human hang-ups are so adorable,” he observed, and took a step toward me. I took a step back. “Bet it’ll take you less than a month to lose all yours.”

“What part of ‘not gay’ is giving your brain error messages?!”

“Doesn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Is this your latest evil plan? Trying to get me to switch teams? ‘Cause I gotta say . . . not so much evil, as--” *confusing*. That was what I was gonna say, but admitting that was not something I thought it wise to do at that moment. “Not so much evil, as lame.”

“*Told* you, the only plan I’ve got is taking a Consort.” Big flash of gold that seemed cold, instead of warm. Yeah, he was getting angry. “It’s not *Sophie’s Choice*, nummy. All I need’s a simple yes, or no.”

I backed a few more feet toward the hallway, Spike matching me step for step. “And if I say no--what then, huh? You kill me and decorate the kitchen with my blood and innards?” Just saying the word *innards* around someone who could easily show you your own? Maybe not the smartest move ever.

One second, Spike was all narrow-eyed indignance and five feet away; the next, he was nuzzling my neck like he’d done the other night, holding me gun-in-his-pocket

close.

“If you say no, I walk away. Find someone else,” he murmured against my throat, kissing and licking and nipping at the skin. Reptile!me--you know, the part of the human brain that still fears fire and thinks the sky’s falling every time there’s thunder--was screaming bloody murder. The rest of my brain, was trying very hard to reiterate how gay I wasn’t.

And my body, which was all horny teenage guy, was starting to . . . react.

We’re not gay! My brain insisted. Reptile!me hissed and took shelter in its cave. My body was too busy getting hard to pay attention to either of them.

“But if you say yes, love. . . .” Spike walked us backwards till we hit the wall next to the swinging doors, then sighed against my neck, soft and cool. “If you say yes, you’ll be lavished with love, attention, affection, and sex . . . and money, too.”

“You’re, like--kidding, right?”

“No. I’m, like--not.”

“What about Drusilla?”

“What about her? Not in the picture, anymore, is she?”

Since I couldn't see what his mouth was doing--smirk, leer, sneer, grin--I couldn't tell if he was kidding, or . . . well, he couldn't be *serious*, but why would he lie?

Uh, to get to the Slayer, dipstick! Remember her?

But even for a vamp-plan, it was far too convoluted and screwy to make sense. Which meant. . . .

“Oh.” I let out a shuddery breath. He meant it. He *meant it*. “Oh, fuck me.”

“A Consort with initiative! I like that!” I could hear the smirk in Spike's voice; he ground his groinal area against mine and started kissing his way up to my mouth.

“Gah!” I shoved him back so hard he nearly fell over, but he caught himself easily. “Dude! Not. Gay!”

“Harris, Jr., there, might disagree with you.” He pointed at my crotch, then sauntered toward me, smirk firmly in

place. I shrank against the wall, making the sign of the cross with both index fingers--not that that wards anything off, believe me, I know--but he kept going. Past me and through the swinging doors.

“Be seein’ ya, pet.”

And he was gone.

My head thumped back against the wall and I took some deep breaths. I tried to think unsexy thoughts . . .

Principal Snyder in a speedo, Mr. Anastasio in a two-piece. But they kept turning into Spike in a speedo, and Spike in a two-piece (which should’ve been ridiculous, but my body wasn’t laughing).

There was a loud thud from just outside the kitchen, and I jumped, expecting naked!horny!Spike--or even worse: naked!horny!Mr. Anastasio, holding a meat cleaver and a severance check--to come barreling through the doors.

But after a few seconds, no one came in.

“Thank God,” I sighed. My brain agreed. Reptile!me peeked out of its cave, hoping for an all clear.

My body . . . just stayed wired and hard.

Be seein' ya, pet.

That didn't bode at all well for my longevity, or my heterosexuality.

July 3

The next night was one of the busiest nights I'd worked, so far.

If Spike was lurking around--snacking on the hordes of screaming, horny women or picking off the waitstaff--I didn't notice.

Close rolled around. Even with Paco and Sonny, the titanic piles of dishes and glasses took forever to get cleaned and put away. There was floor to mop, bathrooms to clean, table and counter tops to wipe down. . . .

I was too tired to keep an eye out for horny, bisexual vampires.

Finally, it was time to lock up and head on back to town. Sonny and I went outside, mumbling disinterested good nights. A few minutes later, he roared off on his motorcycle. I sat on the front steps, arms crossed on my knees, head pillowed on arms, waiting for my ride to finish getting reamed by Mr. Anastasio.

I wasn't the only one to slip after Paco's turn at mop.

Anyway, I must've dozed off, 'cause when I woke up, Spike was sitting next to me, watching me.

"Hello, pet."

"That is really fucking creepy, man," I yawned. Being scared took levels of energy I no longer had, and whatever weirdo vamp games he was playing obviously didn't involve corpse! or vamp!Xander. At least not any time soon.

"You're pretty when you sleep." He reached out and touched my face very softly. "You look even younger than you are."

"I'm not gay, and your fingers are cold," I said, sitting up and away from his touch, but his fingers followed me.

“That doesn’t matter, and I’m fairly sure you wouldn’t approve of my means of warming them up. . . .” His smile was fleeting, predatory and made me shudder.

Thankfully, it was quickly replaced with something more like his usual smirk. “Not safe for pretty, young things to fall asleep out here. Not unless they have someone to watch over them.”

“Is that what you’re doing? Watching over me? Not stalking me?” I waved his hand away. “My bad, then.”

“Your mate’s gone. The Spanish one.”

“What?!”

“Don’t worry, he’s not dead. I sent him home--poor bugger looked ready to drop in his tracks.” I looked around. Yep. The space where Paco’s parks his pick-up was empty. But one space over was full of Spike’s crappy DeSoto. “Told him I’d give you a lift.”

Relief made my shoulders sag and I laughed. “*You* told him?” Disbelief? *Oh*, yeah. The only thing worse than my Spanish was Paco’s English.

Spike shrugged. “Happen to speak Spanish, don’t I? Told him I’d be giving you rides, from now on.” Cue the stupid leer.

I was still figuring out how to respond to that innuendo when what the rest of what Spike said filtered through the haze of exhaustion. Paco was the only person I knew whose shift ended at the same time as mine *and* who was willing to give me a lift if I chipped in for gas.

He was also the only person who--sorta--talked to me, besides Del (one of the strippers) and Sonny . . . and Spike had just chased him off.

I could’ve cheerfully punched him in the face. I settled for screaming at him.

“You--crazy--evil--*bleach-brained*--!”

“Oh, dear, have I over-stepped my bounds?” I didn’t believe that innocent/concerned look on his face, not for one second. “I just figured, us being amigos an’ all, that--”

“We are *not* amigos! You’re--*stalking me!*”

“Same difference.” Another shrug, as if to say tomayto, tomahto. He stood up and offered me his hand--courtly, like I was a delicate little flower, instead of a damn manly dishwasher.

I glared at him and smacked his hand away, bouncing onto my feet. Too fast, as it turns out . . . I overbalanced and nearly fell over. Spike caught me, and used that as an excuse to grope me.

“Stop that! You’re a--an undead perv!” I smacked his hand again--this time off my ass--and put a good fifteen feet of dusty asphalt between us. “Look, if you’re not gonna kill me, just leave me alone, alright? I know what a Consort is! It’s *me* getting the bad-touch from *you*, so the answer is no!”

Spike’s smirk turned into a grin and he sauntered off toward the DeSoto with a shrug. “Come on, nummy. Let’s get you home and tucked into bed.”

“I’m *not* nummy, damnit and no way! There’s no fucking way I’m getting into a car with *you!*” I ranted, knowing that the only thing insaner than walking the twelve miles back to Oxnard in the middle of the night, was going for a ride with Count Drunkula at the wheel.

“I’m not lettin’ you walk all the way back to that fleabag motel of yours alone, pet!” he called. He unlocked the DeSoto and got in. It started up smoothly, and he rolled slowly towards me. I couldn’t see Spike through the painted over windows, but I could imagine the smirk.

Whatever. I turned toward the highway and started walking. The DeSoto followed me, like the worlds biggest, most annoying puppy and I ignored it.

“You won’t make it a mile without some big nasty gettin’ its teeth in you, and you know it!” Spike yelled.

“And this differs from you driving me home, how--?”

“Ha-bloody-ha!” He didn’t say anything else until I was actually on the highway. The DeSoto got closer, then swerved around me, slowing to a crawl again about ten feet away. When I caught up with it a few seconds later, Spike kept pace with me, leaning out the driver-side window.

“I promise I’ll be a perfect gentleman. I’ll keep all my bits to myself until you say otherwise.”

“Until?”

“Well, it’s really only a matter of time till you’re gagging for it--”

“Gee, I can’t imagine who wouldn’t wanna get into a car with *you*. . . .”

“You got any other bright ideas about how you’re gonna make it home in one piece, Xanderrr?” He hissed that ‘R’ on purpose, I realized. I don’t know how he knew it made me shiver, but he knew and he did it on purpose. “In you go--I promise you’ll be safe with me.”

“Well, if you’re giving me your solemn vamp word-of-honor.” I snorted, but had to face the fact that I didn’t like the odds of me making it to the outskirts of Oxnard and my crappy motel room alive.

I stopped, in the middle of the highway and the DeSoto stopped with me.

Mr. Anastasio would let me sleep in the storeroom for one night, right? Till I get things straightened out with Paco? Hell, sleeping out on the front steps would be better than accepting a ride with the undead Mario

Andretti. . . .

“I just wanna see you home safe, Xander.”

What did it say about my state of mind that I actually believed him? Many things, and none of them good.

“Trapped in a moving vehicle with a vampire doesn’t say safe to me.” I started walking again. I could do twelve miles easy. Okay, not so easy, but it wouldn’t kill me. I hoped. And there was still most of a full moon to light the way.

“I’m pretty certain draining you isn’t the way to your heart, pet. So there’s no sense in me doin’ that, is there?” Spike smiled. A real smile, not a smirk or a leer. I caught myself before I could smile back.

“Come on, pet . . . get in.”

“No.”

“Why the bloody hell not?!”

“Even if I was stupid enough to forget the fact that you’re a vampire, you drive like a total lunatic--”

"I drive bloody great!"

"That you think that tells me I don't wanna be in any car that you're piloting, Crash, so run along."

Spike made very English sound of annoyance, and I suddenly missed Giles a lot. "Stop being silly, nummy."

"I'm being very un-silly. Beat it."

"I'll follow you all the way home like this."

I didn't like the idea of him knowing where I was staying, but he was the vamp poster-child for ADHD. He'd probably get distracted by something shiny, and lose interest long before I got back to town. "Go right ahead."

"I'm not bluffin', pet, I will!"

"Have fun."

"Damn it, get in the bloody car!"

"There's no way I'm getting in that car with you, dead-man-driving! No, non, nyet, nien *no!*"

~*~*~*~*~

“Here we are, pet,” Spike drawled as we pulled into the motel parking lot. “Safe as houses.”

He smirked at me and I scowled right back. Two miles into my walk, I’d caved, and gotten into his lame-mobile. Spike didn’t *say* anything, but he radiated satisfaction like cheap cologne.

“Smugness isn’t at all becoming,” I’d said coldly, slamming the door and trying to glare a clear spot through the paint on the windshield.

“That’s not what your scent is saying, nummy.”

So I spent the whole ride crammed against the passenger door like a virgin afraid of being date-raped. After what felt like hours, we hit the outskirts of town and a familiar neon sign glowed in the distance. My motel. I hadn’t volunteered the address and he hadn’t asked. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know how he’d gotten it.

Even though my instinct was screaming at me to bolt out

of the open window and run, run, run, I risked a look at Spike. He was grinning at me, his nostrils flaring delicately.

“Stop . . . smelling me.” I squirmed and reconsidered the window as a means of escape. But I really didn’t think I’d make it out of the car alive. “It’s creepy.”

“Don’t wanna.” Spike leaned closer to me, close enough that I could smell *his* scent: leather, whiskey and cigarettes. But no copper, tonight. Huh. “So, how about a good-night kiss, Xanderrr?”

I *still* maintain he hissed his Rs just to make me shiver.

“Sorry, blood-breath, I don’t kiss on the first date.” (I swear, in my head? That sounded witty and Slayer-esque . . . and not nearly as gay.)

Spike leered. “How ‘bout on the second date?”

“Eww, *no!* And we’re not dating!”

“You were the one who said--”

“I was being glib!”

“Well, then, you’re not very good at that, are you?”

He had me, there. “Apparently not,” I sighed.

“Poor pet,” Spike tsked and pouted, and put his hand on my knee. “I know what’ll put you right--” his hand slid up my thigh. . . .

“Gah!” I warp-nined it out the window, hit the ground hard and rolled to my feet running. Spike’s laughter following me across the parking lot and to my room.

Part Two

July 10th

“Why are you *really* stalking me, Spike?”

I was on a break and Spike was, not for the first time,

waiting for me out near the dumpsters.

He silently offered me a cigarette and I took it. Not that I normally smoked . . . or I didn't before Spike started hanging around during my breaks.

A fluid flick of his wrist--a flash of silver, and it was lit; he snapped the lighter shut with a snick and disappeared it back into a duster pocket. I leaned against a dumpster--not quite close enough for our shoulders to brush--and inhaled shallowly, slowly, sucking in a little air with the smoke. A trick I learned from Jesse in ninth grade.

Spike stared into the shadows, broody and Angel-like, till our cigarettes were smoked down and my break was nearly over.

"Told you." He flicked away the butt and hunched his shoulders. "I want you to be my Consort."

"I already said no." I stubbed out what was left of my cigarette and shoved my hands in my pockets. There seemed to be nothing more to say, so I headed back to the kitchen.

I had one foot back in the mines when I heard him say,

soft and close, like he was right behind me:

“Figure I’ve got till the end of summer to change your mind, love.”

But when I looked over my shoulder, he was gone.

July 19

More nights than not, we wound up eating dinner on the scenic, lonely stretch of highway between the *Fabulous Ladies Night Club* and my motel.

We’d sit facing each other, tailor-style on the hood, or trunk of the DeSoto, eating and talking till the stars faded.

I’d grown to like his fantastic, gory stories, and gotten used to the more-than-occasional innuendos and single entendres. Until I was suddenly alone and stranded somewhere strange, I hadn’t quite realized how much I needed to be talked to, and noticed. It was as if something inside me had grown parched and starved, till Spike lurched into my life. Maybe it was a measure of how depressed and alone I felt, but Spike was . . . good

company. And he paid for dinner.

But that night was different. The past *few* nights had been different. I'd been doing a very un-Xander thing and thinking way too much, lately. I wondered why me, and what would happen at the end of the summer. I wondered where Dru was, and why Spike never talked about her.

Was she dust? Was that Spike's idea of breaking up? Did I even care?

"Earth to nummy. . . ?"

I looked away from dinner, which was balanced on my knees, and up at Spike. He had already scarfed his burger--very rare--and his onion rings. For the past few minutes he'd been watching me eat.

"Sorry. My brain went walk-about for a few seconds." I tried on my goofiest smile. It felt fake.

"Try ten minutes. You alright, love?"

I glanced at him, then back down at my fries. I've never seen him look concerned for anyone but Dru. I

wondered--

Suddenly I was tired of wondering. If I was too cowardly to ask, there was no point in thinking about it. I didn't *want* to think about what the concern on his face meant to and for me. I didn't want to think about *anything*, but I couldn't seem to stop.

I stirred my milkshake and ate a french fry. "I'm okay, just feel kinda blah. Not really that hungry."

Spike snorted. "You? Off your feed? Whatever *blah* is, it must be terminal."

I laughed and ate another fry. Slid a slice of pickle from under my hamburger bun and ate that, too.

"Pet--look at me."

I did. At some point over the past couple of weeks, his face had stopped meaning *enemy* and *death* and *fear*. I didn't know what it's new meaning was, but it had something to do with the warm-fuzzies his concern-face gave me.

"Tell me what's wrong . . . been moping for three nights,

now.” He brushed his finger between my eyebrows and I stopped frowning. “Keep that up and you’ll turn into Peaches.”

“Why’s Dru not in the picture anymore?” I blurted out, totally unprepared for the pain and sadness that sucked the life--light?--out of Spike’s face.

Nice going, Xan-man. Rip out his heart and go Lord of the Dance on it, why don’tcha? “Jeez, Spike, I didn’t mean--you don’t have to--”

“S alright, pet.” Spike tried on a big, fake smile of his own. I made a mental note that big, fake smiles really do look pretty fake. “You remember I wanted the red witch to work some mojo to help me get Dru back?”

I rubbed my temple in remembrance. “Not clearly, but yeah. But Buffy said you decided to win her back by being extra Big Bad?”

“Shed rivers of blood tryin’ to win her.” Spike nodded ruefully, and reptile!me hissed and hid. “But it was too late. She didn’t love me anymore--not like she used to.”

Considering the way she’d always seemed to hang off of

Angelus, I thought that maybe Dru had never loved Spike like she used to.

Even if I'd still hated him, I wouldn't have hated him enough to say *that*.

"We had more than a hundred years together." He sighed, and for a moment it was like looking at another person. Like looking at the man he'd been, maybe. "Thought we'd have forever, but--" he shrugged and drummed his Docs on the front fender.

"I'm sorry," I said. I think that was the moment I forgave him for the microscope thing. A few months ago, if there'd been a spell to make Cordy love me again, I'd have knocked a thousand losers over their pointy, best-friend-coveting heads to get it.

"She doesn't want me. I can live with that. Some days better than others, but . . . I can't be alone." Sad, solemn, scared blue eyes and I could see more than a glimpse of the man he must've been. Someone kind, who loved desperately and completely. "Need someone to take care of and obsess over."

"She didn't know how lucky she was." It was the first

thing that popped into my head, and thus, fell immediately from my lips. I blushed, but held his gaze until he smiled at me and sat up a little straighter. "Dru was kinda nutty anyway."

"Sweet boy," he murmured, brushing my hair off my face. Then he chuckled and looked away, dusting his wrappers and take-out containers onto the ground. "Dru's bloody insane, but she's always known her mind. Knows what she wants and it's not me."

Sounds like a good working definition of insane, to me, I thought, leaning toward him to--I didn't know what, and I tipped over my dinner in the process.

Shit--!

Spike caught the milkshake and the food before I could even finish the thought.

"My hero." I was trying for sarcasm, but fell far short. "Thanks."

"No worries, love." His smirk looked more like a smile, and it made my heart skip like a record player. We sat there staring at each other for a long time. I think we

were waiting for each other to make the first move.

Finally, Spike did. He tossed my take-out over his shoulder, and inched closer to me, stopping when our knees bumped and our faces were still a few inches apart. I closed the distance between us, till his eyes were all I could see and the tips of our noses brushed.

“Gonna kiss me?” he asked.

“I’ve been giving it some thought.”

“You think too much, nummy--”

I only kissed him to shut him up, and it was just a so-so kiss, anyway. At least that’s what I told myself, forty-five minutes later, while I jerked off in the shower.

July 23

I was trying to find the right description for my current situation.

Said situation being me and Spike, parked behind the motel, in the back of his DeSoto, frustratingly and fully

clothed, and dry-humping. I figured if I could put it in sane-ish terms, that maybe later, I wouldn't worry myself to death about what it meant.

He was straddling my legs, rocking and grinding his hard-on against mine, leering at me. Sometime during the past few weeks, I'd stopped wanting to punch the leer away, and started wanting to kiss it away, see it turn into something needy and vulnerable. As needy and vulnerable as he made me feel.

"You're evil," I told him, wondering, for the first time ever, what'd be like to fuck another guy--if Spike'd *let* me fuck him. "Like, the evillest vampire ever."

Wicked, cool-blue eyes laughed at me and lusted after me. Then he lifted his pelvis till my cock was behind his balls. "Flattery'll get you everywhere, pet."

Everywhere. I groaned, hating my clothing more than I ever had. I was hot and hard, and Spike would feel cool and soft . . . against me and around me.

"Oh, God, this is so . . . so . . ." there *had* to be a description for this kind of sitch, other than *stupid* and *really stupid* and *what the hell am I doing?* "Help me out,

here--"

Spike chuckled and kissed me again. He tasted smoky and salty, but not coppery, something for which I was very grateful that night. "Good?"

"*Weird!*" I gasped as he ground down against me *hard*. I kept thrusting up, like that'd actually get me inside him. "Getting to third base with a vampire. A *male* vampire . . . gonna be one hell of a 'How I Spent My Summer Vacation' essay when school lets back in."

"Hmm, school . . . where you're going to be double-majoring in business administration and accounting? 'Buckling down' and 'going for the gusto', as it were?"

"That may have been a slight exaggeration of my post-high school plans. . . ." I blushed, and Spike darted in to lick a slow stripe up my throat, to my chin.

"Love it when you blush." He kissed his way back down to my throat, then slithered down to his knees between my legs. He blinked up at me, licking his lips. "Blood's right under the skin and I can practically taste it."

"And that isn't at all distur--oh, shit." He'd unzipped my

cargo pants, snaked one cool hand into my boxers.

“Always thought you were cute . . . like those floppy-eared mongrels that populate Disney cartoons.” Spike smiled innocently, all the while kung fu-gripping and stripping me like a pro. “But seein’ you like this . . . you’re bloody gorgeous. Fuckable.”

Tighter when I needed it to be, slow when I needed it to be, and fast when slow didn’t cut it, anymore. Spike gave the best handjobs in the world. And without breaking eye contact, which made it even hotter, somehow.

Just before I would’ve come, he clamped down on me just hard enough to be on the uncomfortable side of too-tight.

“Spike--?” I whined, covering his hand with my own, trying to loosen it. This was not how the getting Xander-off game was supposed to end. His eyes were more gold than blue, and he was smiling like a shark: all teeth.

His hand tightened for a scary, painful moment, then he turned it into a slow, rough stroke that made me groan. Next thing I know, he’s bracing his hands on either side of my thighs and--

Proceeds to short-circuit my brain by licking the tip of my cock like it's a lollipop, his eyes closing in pleasure too obvious to be mistaken for anything else.

"Love the way you taste," he says. Which should've made me duck my head and die of mortification. It just made me harder. Watching my cock slide into the cool wetness of his mouth made me harder. His eyes flashing like wedding rings and his cheeks hollowing as he sucked me made me harder.

At that point, I'm pretty sure an appendectomy would've made me harder.

I tried not to buck up off the seat and choke him; I'd made that mistake once with Cordy and that'd been the first and last blowjob I'd gotten from her.

But Spike had no such problems.

Spike also had no gag reflex and no need to breathe.

As if he could see the realization hit, the skin around his eyes crinkled in a smile. I took that as permission to go for it. It's not like he couldn't stop me if I did something

he didn't want.

Putting one hand on the seat and one in his hair, I levered myself up onto hand and feet, up into his mouth and down his throat. He made this rumbly purring sound and his throat rippled around my cock like silk caught in a mild breeze.

"Spike--" I choked out, then I was just fucking his mouth, guiding his head by tugging on his hair. He didn't try to slow me down, or keep me still. He swallowed around me like a wet dream come true.

I came so fast and so hard it hurt, my hand clenching in Spike's hair. . . .

Then I flopped back down to the seat, shaking and sweating and panting. Spike uncoiled from the floor like a sexy snake, and straddled my legs again, kneeling on the seat. He leaned over me, till his lips brushed mine, then kissed me.

I could taste myself on his lips, in his mouth, heavy and salt-sweet. I liked that no matter how many times I swiped my tongue around his mouth, that taste never seemed to diminish . . . like I was a permanent part of

him.

“Was right, wasn’t I?” He bit my lower lip, not quite hard enough to break skin, and pulled my hand between us, moving it back and forth over his crotch. He was still hard. “Bitter-sweet.”

“Jesus, Spike--” then we were kissing again. This time, I chased down the coppery-whiskey-smoky taste of his mouth.

I fumbled with his fly, trying to unbutton him and stroke him at the same time. Finally, his pants were halfway down his thighs and his cock was in my hand: cool, hard, wet and--yeah, uncut.

“God, yeah, pet--” he shivered and braced his hands on my shoulders, this time. I was clumsy and inept, so scared and excited that I couldn’t keep any kind of rhythm, and he kept slipping out of my hand.

I was about to apologize when Spike nibbled his way down to my jugular vein. He sucked until he left a hickey that was probably visible from space, and when he spoke, the words were more cool puffs of air against my neck than real sounds.

“Don’t stop, love.” It was a request, not an order. But there was nothing I could do for him that hadn’t been done before, nothing that’d blow his mind the way he’d literally blown mine.

“I--I don’t know what to do.” Oh, I had some ideas, but . . . if I couldn’t even manage a decent handjob, no way was I gonna attempt a blowjob. Besides, I had a feeling that I wasn’t prepared to suck cock--suck a *vampire’s* cock.

“Tell me what to do?”

“Get me off,” he said, as if that was obvious. His face looked like it couldn’t decide between vamp and human, and his eyes were squeezed shut, rolling under the lids.

Oh-kay, I thought, as he slid in and out of my fist, leaving behind sticky, luke-warm wetness. *Okay, Spike’s a guy, horny, and ready to come, so this shouldn’t be brain surgery. . . .*

I ran my finger down his cock, to his balls--his skin was so soft--cupping and squeezing, before stroking the even softer skin behind them.

“Everywhere?” I asked, stroking a little higher and

further each time, till I was one push away from being inside him. Spike opened his eyes. There was no blue to be seen and when he smiled . . . when he smiled, his teeth were very, very sharp-looking.

He grabbed my other hand and pulled it to his cock, spreading his legs open wider.

“Jesus, don’t be so damn subtle all the time,” I murmured, circling and circling with my finger, waiting for I didn’t know *what*, till his cock twitched in my hand. I stabbed into him once, hard, past his body’s resistance till my finger wouldn’t go any further and froze, statue-still.

“Xander--” he gasped, and it turned into a muted roar as the demon won the face-off. He shot all over my hand and his t-shirt, clutching my shoulder’s hard enough to make my bones creak. But I didn’t care. I was too busy memorizing every curve, every muscle and line of him.

I’d never seen anything more frightening and more beautiful in my life.

Then he sagged back against the front seat, gameface smoothing away. He looked like corrupted innocence . . .

like a fallen angel.

When he opened his whirly, gold-blue, sun-sky eyes and saw me, he smiled. “Hullo, nummy.”

I leaned in to kiss him, not trusting myself to say anything--and I *would* have said *anything*.

I kissed him till lack of oxygen made my head spin and ache, then I flopped back against the seat

He took my hand and pulled it up to his face and licked it clean slowly, lingeringly. It'd be at least a few more minutes till I got hard again, but my body was trying its best by the time he kissed my hand and let it go.

“You’re a bloody natural, Xanderrr . . . got great instincts,” he purred, all half-lidded eyes and satisfied smirk. I put my hands on his thighs and even in the dimness, I could see the difference between our complexions. “Such a clever Consort you’ll be.”

“Spike. . . .” I was still in that say-anything mode. He could’ve talked me into being brunch with a little effort. “Come on, don’t wreck the afterglow. . . .”

“I’ll take such good care of you, pet.” He’s not that much smaller than me, but the way he curled in my arms--on my lap, his head tucked under my chin, like a kid--made me feel protective of him. “In every way you can imagine . . . and quite a few you can’t. I’ll give you the love you always wanted and never got. I’ll make you *mine*, and I won’t ever let anyone take my Consort away from me.”

Even reptile!me didn’t hiss at the C-word, anymore. My brain was starting to make consider-y noises and my body had been on-board from day one. It was time for a dash of cold water, or next thing I knew, I’d be saying yes. “Why did you pick me?”

Spike kissed my throat so lightly, I barely felt it. It didn’t even occur to me to wig. “Fancy you, don’t I?”

So much for that. I’d expected him to say something about having been drunk, and it seeming like a good idea at the time. That would’ve killed the afterglow, and made resisting him much easier.

“But *why?*” If his feelings were as genuine as I was starting to think they were, I was only digging myself in deeper. But I really didn’t get why, when he could have anyone in the world, he’d pick me. “Why *me?*”

“Fishing for compliments, love?”

I hadn't been, but I blushed, anyway. “Something like that . . . I'm trying to understand this.”

Spike sat up a little and put his hand over my heart. Without the demon's gold to light them, his eyes were dark and serene. “You're pretty, you're funny, you taste and smell good . . . but that's all the obvious bits.

“There's darkness in you, love. It's silent, primal and unapologetic--but in spite of that, your soul shines so bright I can feel it like summer sunshine, warm and clean and pure. Standing in that light doesn't burn, and it doesn't make me feel like a monster. It makes me feel like. . . .” he frowned and let his hand drop away from my chest.

“Like what?” I asked. It was as if his next words could illuminate this whole Consort-thing for me. Maybe if I could see from his point of view, I could make it easier for both of us to walk away. “Tell me?”

Spike smiled sadly, and tucked his head under my chin again. “Like a man.”

Illumination.

And I still had to bite my lip, to keep myself from saying anything at all.

July 27

“. . . and then Matt said ‘*shit, Abilene’s, like, eight hundred miles that-a-way, man.* We better start runnin.’ Then he jumps out of the van and starts running down Main Street.”

I laughed so hard I choked. “Please, t-tell he didn’t actually run all the way to Texas,” I wheezed. Del patted me on the back firmly, but the gum was already a goner.

“Well, it goes without saying we were all higher than kites, that night.” Del shrugged self-deprecatingly and ran a hand over his short, dark hair. “He only made it a few miles down the road, anyway.”

“Jeez, *only* a few miles?”

It was after close and everyone had gone home except

for Del and I. Spike hadn't shown up for any of my breaks and he hadn't been waiting for me after shift, either. Del had offered to stick around and give me a lift in case he didn't show. He wouldn't take no for an answer, so we wound up sitting on the front steps, killing time.

His stories weren't as exciting as Spike's, but also not as bloody.

The back-patting had turned into more of a sustained rub. "We didn't really take Matt seriously . . . till Wayne noticed Matt'd been gone an awful long while. He's just lucky we found him at all. He was running in the wrong direction--more towards Los Angeles than Texas."

"Can you imagine if he'd turned up dusty and high on, like, Rodeo? Oh, my God--*tres* embarrassing," I said, ala Cordy. Del laughed.

"Those were good times, my friend. Though there were plenty more times that weren't as fun, or outright sucked. That's what being a teenager's about." He grinned. "It makes you appreciate your twenties a lot more."

I mocked-groaned. "Words of wisdom from the old guy?"

“I can see I’m casting pearls before swine, here.” Del rolled his eyes. “But take it from me, life gets a lot better by the time you hit twenty-five.

“Easy for *you* to say. You’re so good-looking that women pay to see you dance while naked. In the lottery of life, you’re already coming up roses.”

A blush darkened his complexion even more and he looked away.

Putting my foot in it is my mutant power, one that can never be used for good.

I nudged Del’s leg with my own till he looked at me again. When he did, I smiled apologetically. “I just meant that I’m not like you. I’m average. An ordinary guy, destined to have a mediocre life.” *Except for the occasional slay, and until something slimy eats me.*

“Average and mediocre aren’t words I’d use to describe *you*,” Del said softly. He put his arm around my shoulder and looked me in the eye. “I have a gut-feeling that your life is gonna be very interesting.”

“*Really?*” No one’s ever said that to me before, not even Willow. I immediately thought the words *Consort* and *Spike*, but forced them away. There’s interesting and there’s suicidal. “You really think that?”

“Yup.” Del eased a little closer, his arm tightening around me. “Tell ya what else--”

Just then an engine revved in the distance. Del looked past me, toward the highway and smiled wryly.

“Looks like your ride’s finally here.” Del nodded at the shadow-colored DeSoto tearing down the road, his arm dropping away from me. “That’s a unique set of wheels he’s got.”

“Yeah . . . unique is definitely a word for all-things-Spike,” I sighed. It sounded kinda moony, so I covered it up by waving at the DeSoto as it turned into the lot. I had no idea how anyone, vamp or otherwise, could see through the painted-over windshield, but I didn’t doubt that he could.

“Can I ask you something, Xan?” Del’s dark eyes ticked from me, to the DeSoto, and back. “Are you and Spike . . . *seeing* each other?”

My face went up in flames so hot, for a moment I was sure they were literal. “Oh, we’re not--I mean we *haven’t--*” aside from make-out sessions and blowjobs before and after work--okay, and during most of my breaks--we hadn’t really done anything.

We weren’t dating and we certainly hadn’t had . . . gay sex. Though every night since the first time we kissed, we seemed to push the envelope more and more. . . .

I wanted him more and more.

“Spike and I are--” it occurred to me that this was like Cordy and me, all over again. Only I had been cast in the role of Cordelia Chase and Spike was the dashing young loser feeling me up in closets and empty classrooms.

“We’re. . . .”

“Complicated?” Del asked.

My grin felt big and stupid. “Sorta. I’m not really sure what we are,” I admitted, as the DeSoto rolled to a stop in the first available space. Spike got out, his hair and face a white gleam in the club’s lights. He patted himself down for his cancer-sticks and lighter. Right on cue, my

heart sped up, but not out of fear. Not for the past few weeks.

“I heard he told Paco he was your boyfriend, and to steer clear of you, if he knew what was good for him.”

“He *what?!?*”

Spike looked over in our direction and smirked. I knew he could hear every word we were saying. I glared at him, then turned my attention completely to Del. He was looking down at his sneakers and smiling.

“And he’s always hanging around here, waiting for you to go on breaks. . . .”

If he’d been seen, that was only because he’d *wanted* to be seen. He was marking his territory. Was it any wonder that I'd really only made one friend in all the weeks I'd been here? Spike had scared off all potential friends, except Del.

Who probably thought I had the worst taste in guys *ever*. And he probably wasn't the only one.

I buried my face in my hands. Having everyone think I

was gay was one thing, but having everyone think I was being gay with *Spike*--I didn't know whether I was mortified or proud. I think I was both. "Oh, God . . . please tell me this isn't common knowledge?"

"I'm afraid it is. To anyone with eyes . . . or an ear for gossip. He's got it bad for you."

I risked a glance across the parking lot. Spike was sitting on the hood of the DeSoto; he winked at me and leered. Oh, yeah. He could hear us. "Or maybe he's just an egomaniac who can't take *go away* for an answer."

"Or that." Del clapped me on the shoulder. "Anyways, he's waitin' for you, and he doesn't look like the patient type. Hasta luego."

"Later, man." For some reason, I couldn't meet his eyes without blushing. I was about to turn away, when he said my name softly.

"If he starts shirkin' any more of his responsibilities. . . ."
Del stepped close to me, and my heart beat did a little skippy-thing, like a way toned down version of what it did when I saw Spike. "You should know there's at least one other guy in Oxnard who'd be more than happy to

take you home.”

“Th-thanks, Del.”

“Anytime,” he said, and his eyes saying the same thing, only with a lot more feeling.

I was still blushing when I got to the DeSoto. Spike was still sitting on the hood, smoking, but he flicked away his cigarette and opened his arms welcomingly as I got closer.

“Hullo, pet--”

“You jerk!” I hissed, meaning to walk right past him-- maybe even walk all the way home and get eaten, or turned, just to spite him. But Spike grabbed me around my waist and pulled me back against him for grinding and nuzzling.

“How is it you always smell so good, nummy?” Gentle human teeth nibbled my earlobe and warm fingers brushed my nipples. “My Xanderrr.”

I leaned back in his arms before I remembered I was angry. *Manipulative bastard!* “Not yours.”

“Not *yet* . . . didn’t mean to be so late. I was held up.”

I can imagine. Spike was *very* warm. Guilt, anger, self-contempt and Spike-contempt were all tying in the what-Xander’s-feeling race. “Whatever.”

“I see you found a way to keep yourself entertained.”

I chose to ignore his innuendoing. “You leaned on Paco just to perv your way into being my chauffeur!”

“Your point is--?”

“That you have no conscience and no sense of decency!”

Spike thought that over for a few seconds, then kissed the spot between my neck and shoulder that makes my body go all brainless. “Vampire, pet. And there isn’t a low I wouldn’t sink to to make you mine.”

He has a knack for saying just the thing to disarm me, and cut right through my pitiful defenses.

One of Spike’s hands slid down my torso to my crotch. “Miss me, pet?” he asked, squeezing a lot harder than a

well-adjusted, human boy like me should enjoy. Not the first time he ever did that--or the tenth--but his touch still made me want, made me jump and tingle, like static electricity.

“Yeah, I’ve been waiting to be mauled and chewed on all night.”

“Disrespectful brat.”

“Homicidal pervert.”

“Uneducated lout.”

“Mascara wearing Nancy-boy.”

“I ought to take you over my knee and teach you proper respect for your master.”

Cue the breathy moan, and a sudden wet spot forming on my jeans.

“Well, well . . . I think someone wants to be disciplined.”

I wasn’t sure what I wanted, only that it involved me calling Spike master, my ass and lots of hurty-naughty

touching.

That's how effortlessly he pushed buttons I didn't even know I had.

"Please, not here--"

"Tell me, nummy . . . have you been a bad boy?" He pinched my nipple hard enough to make me yelp and squirm against him for more. "Do you need to be punished?"

I closed my eyes and saw that hungry-needy look on Del's face, remembered the low-grade tingle it'd caused. "Spike--"

"Hush, pet, and let's wave good night to your little friend," he whispered. For a moment I blanked, then I remembered. Del.

Spike's hands shifted to my hip and my stomach, and he maneuvered us around so we were facing the front steps again. Del was still standing to there, hands in his pockets, watching us.

"Hmm, you have another admirer, Xanderrr; I can smell it

from here. *'Night, mate! Get home safe, yeah?'* Spike called over my shoulder. He waved, nudging me with his chin to do the same.

"Hey, you too, man!" Del waved back, and started off toward the other end of the parking lot. "'Bye, Xan!"

"Bye!" Spike was hard and grinding against my ass; at the same time his hand on my stomach petted and gentled.

Del got into his Jeep with a final wave, and pulled out of the lot. Spike's hand dropped down to my crotch, picking up where it left off.

"Big, judgmental and tryin' to take what's mine . . . reminds me of Peaches," he said, mildly, as Del's Jeep disappeared down the highway. "I don't think I like him."

I shuddered. Spike squeezed me once more then let go, opening the passenger door for me.

We got dinner at the DMP, and ate watching the the stars and talking. We made out on the hood of the car, then Spike gave me a world-class blowjob that ended with his fingers in my ass and my cock down his throat. Another envelope, pushed.

We made out some more and he drove me back to my motel. We didn't say another word about Del.

Part Three

August 2

“So . . . how’s things with the hubby?”

“Bite me, Ruiz.” I patted myself down for cigarettes-- which I only bought because Spike was always running out of smokes and forgetting to buy more. “Got a light?”

Del produced a neon green zippo and I thanked him heartily with my eyes as I took the first puff.

“Spike’s not my husband, he’s my--” I thought of the see-ya-later hump we’d had in the DeSoto just before my shift. “Fuck-buddy.”

Or he will be, when we actually fuck.

Just thinking of--*that*, and I started getting hard. And yeah, I was on break, but excusing myself just to go beat off seemed like a breach of etiquette, or something. It'd just have to wait till Spike came to pick me up.

Del leaned against the dumpster, his arm brushing mine. That only made matters worse, of course. My brain had long ago stopped trying to tell me I wasn't gay and thanks to Spike, it was as if my body was hypersensitized.

I just thanked God I was still wearing my apron.

"Fuck-buddies, huh?" He sounded unconvinced, and looked mildly concerned. "Does *he* know that?"

"Yeah." I exhaled smoke and wished I could send my conscience with it. Life would be easier if I was dead. Well, undead. "Spike and I are entirely too different to have any kind of lasting connection. First, he's, like, *way* older than me--"

"You're eighteen and he's--what, twenty-six? Twenty-

seven? Same age as me.”

A little older than that, actually. . . . “And he can be a huge jerk. None of my friends like him. I’m pretty sure that *I* don’t like him. He smokes non-stop, he’s rude to everyone, he drinks like a fish--” I could’ve ticked off his flaws all night, but Del took my caught my hand and held it, looking into my eyes.

“So? You guys have a kinda *Moonlighting*-David-Maddie thing going on. That’s cute.” At my probably blank look he sighed. “Sam and Diane? Bogie and Bacall? Uh . . . April O’Neil and Casey Jones?”

“*Oh!*” I laughed, picturing Spike in a hockey mask and wielding a cricket bat. Then I pictured *myself* in the hockey mask with the cricket bat. I really didn’t wanna be the girl, in my fantasies, even one as kickass as April O’Neil. It’d be setting a bad precedent for myself.

“It’s not like that, it’s--okay, we come from two totally different worlds, Del. Not *West Side Story* different, but light-force/dark-force different. He’s done things and he has . . . quirks. . . .” *which I find morally and ethically reprehensible. If I let myself fall for him, at best I’d have to give up huge chunks of myself, and at worst--he’d*

make me just like him.

I shivered, dropped my cig and stubbed it out. I was already turning into him.

“Quirks?” Del’s concern wasn’t so mild anymore; I looked down at my shoes to escape it. A Willow-face was the last thing I wanted to see. “Quirks that’d put your health or life in danger?”

“*My health or life? Nah.*” *My soul’s another story.* “He’s got no conscience to speak of, but I don’t think he’d hurt me. He can be . . . sweet, sometimes.”

“Shit, Xan, he sounds like bad news. Why--”

“--am I with him? Good question. One I’ve been asking myself for weeks.” I shrugged, trying to roll some of the tension out of my shoulders. No such luck. “I dunno, Del . . . he makes me feel” *needed, wanted, sexy, smart, worthy* “good.”

“Sure doesn’t sound like it.”

“I know.” When I glanced at Del out of the corner of my eye, I could tell he was brooding. I squeezed his hand to

get his attention and redirect it. “You know the first girl I ever had sex with tried to strangle me during.”

His mouth dropped open, a wide, dark ‘O’. “You’re shitting me!”

“Nope. I tell you that only to put Spike into perspective. I’m destined to attract people that are bad for me. Spike’s certainly not the first, but . . . he’s actually been the nicest.”

“Xander--‘he’s a sociopath, but he’s a sweetheart’ isn’t sane-person logic!” Del stepped in front of me and put his hands on my shoulders. His eyes were angry; righteous indignation, I think. “Even if it was, don’t you think you deserve better than a guy whose only sterling quality is that he doesn’t try to choke you to death while you fuck?”

“That’s not how it is--”

“Then how is it?”

I couldn’t tell him what I didn’t know.

He sighed, and slid his hands up my neck till they were

cupping my face, then leaned down to kiss me. It' wa a warm, soft, shy kiss. A not-Spike kiss, that caused not-Spike tingles. But Del broke it before I could examine how I felt about it.

“I shouldn't have done that--” he was apologizing when all I wanted him to do was kiss me again. If kissing him felt one tenth as good as it did to kiss Spike--

I grabbed his tool-belt--he danced dressed as a construction worker, had been for the past month--and yanked him to me, bouncing up on my toes to meet his lips.

Yeah, he was a good kisser. A little better than Cordy, but nowhere near as good as Spike. He was warmer, though . . . all pulse-having and with the soul. . . .

He was everything it was safe and okay for me to want, and I *did*, I just--wanted Spike more.

“Xander,” he said hesitantly, pushing me away, then pulling me close. He was hard, too. “Believe me when I say that I would be all over you if I thought you were into me, too, but--”

“Spike.” I winced guiltily, and sagged against the dumpster.

“Yeah . . . Spike.” Del let me go and stepped back a few feet, adjusting his cut-offs.

“Damn it, I can’t believe I feel guilty for kissing another man behind the back of a guy who isn’t even my boyfriend!”

“Guilt is a side effect of character. And he’s your hubby, not your boyfriend.”

“You’re incredibly annoying.”

“Not to mention incredibly hot.”

“And incredibly modest, too. You’re a triple-threat.”

“Finally, someone’s noticed. Come on, let’s get you back inside before my raw, animal magnetism overwhelms you again.”

We smiled at each other for a few seconds, then Del put his arm around me and steered us toward the exit. Once there, I put a hand on his before he could turn the knob.

He looked at me questioningly.

“Am I a himbo, Del?”

“Xan.” He smiled big and bright. The Cordy-resemblance was eery. “Kissing me doesn’t mean you’re a himbo. It just means that sometimes, you have great taste in men. Sometimes.”

“Ah. Thanks for clearing that up.”

“Hey, I’m here to help.”

“You know,” I confided as we stepped into the familiar miasma of bland bar-fare and cheap, generic cleanser. “I *still* get wood when someone puts their hands on my throat like they’re gonna choke me.”

Del looked torn between laughter and horror. I knew the feeling. “Um . . . does that happen to you a lot?”

“You’d be surprised.”

~*~*~*~*~

That night, for the whole ride back to the motel that night, Spike chain-smoked five cigarettes and stared straight ahead. I did the same, except for the chain-smoking part.

Something was up.

When we pulled into the motel parking lot, he shut the engine off and sat there till he finished his cigarette, then kissed me hard, his tongue sweeping my mouth and teeth almost clinically. There was none of the playful groping and teasing that usually accompanied Spike-kisses, and when he suddenly stopped, he said something that made me go cold.

“You taste of him . . . and you reek of his pheromones.”

I blushed. “Spike--”

“So pretty when you do that . . . do you want him? Be straight with me, pet. You won’t like the consequences if you aren’t.”

“I--” *don’t know how I feel about anything anymore.* “--he’s my friend. That’s all.”

“Doesn’t taste like that was all to me.”

“Spike. . . .”

“Tastes like you don’t know *what* you want, boy.” Spike went to gameface and back, between one blink and the next.

“It was just a kiss, and it just *happened*.” My vision got blurry for a second. When I blinked again, tears ran down my face. “I didn’t plan it--I don’t wanna hurt you.”

“And I don’t want to hurt you.” Wavering and flickering gold that Spike was only barely controlling. “If you don’t want me, tell me and I’m gone, but I won’t let you play me. Been there, done that, not interested in a repeat.”

“I wasn’t trying to play you.” But I didn’t know what I *had* been trying to do. Maybe make a last, pathetic bid for normalcy. “I won’t do it again.”

Spike silenced me with another kiss; this one was so tender and un-Spike, it was almost chaste. But these days, all Spike had to do was look at me and I’d get hard, never mind kissing me.

So I didn't even notice he'd reached past me and unlocked the passenger door until he was starting up the DeSoto again, staring through the painty mess on the windshield.

"Go, pet. Get your rest."

"But--"

"I said go on, Xander. I'll be back after sunset, but I doubt you'll find me particularly good company, in the meantime." Cold, soft words, and for the first time in about a month, I was afraid of him. He wouldn't look at me, and I wasn't sure I wanted him too.

I got out of the car--had only just shut the door before Spike peeled out. Then I stood there, feeling guilty, feeling cold, long after Spike disappeared beyond the horizon.

Someone was gonna die before the night was out. I was glad it wasn't me.

I hoped it wasn't Del.

August 4

We were naked on a rest-stop picnic table. The stars burned and wheeled above us, and Spike was riding me.

I felt like I'd been hard forever, and for not nearly long enough. He was tighter and definitely cooler than Faith. And the sounds he made--growls and grunts and every so often, high, breathy gasps--were driving me insane. I wanted to come so badly, but I didn't want this to end . . . being with him.

In the bright light of the mostly-full moon, he was pale and unearthly. His face rippled and shimmered, like he was trying to fight off the demon.

"Don't." I leaned up on one elbow and touched his face. "Let me see."

He stared into my eyes for a long time before nodding. In less than a second, I was staring at the demon, into the face I'd only seen glimpses of over the past few weeks. His skin was still soft--and warmer--even though the planes of his face were different.

“Oh, Spike,” I said as he nuzzled my palm. I arched up under him, trying to get deeper, to be a part of him. “Oh, jeez--”

“Xander.” He brought his face close to mine like he was going to kiss me, but stopped just short of doing so. So I kissed *him*, hard, darting my tongue into his mouth, being careful of his fangs. Still, there was a brief sting and the taste of blood.

Spike’s growl rumbled through us both and he pushed me down to the table and he came on my chest, bearing down so hard that I came, too.

~*~*~*~*~

“Christ, you’re like a bloody Viking.”

(It was the first thing either of us said afterwards and *Spike* said it. I just thought it bore spotlighting. Anyway--)

His face was tucked into the crook of my neck, his body a solid, perfect weight on mine. We were in the exact same position we’d been since Spike shook off gameface and slumped down on top of me. Every few minutes, a guilty

voice in my head had been whispering something about pulling out, getting dressed and going back to the motel . . . I could maybe even invite him in, tonight. . . .

“And you’re--” just thinking about what he was made my head spin and my body try to stand at attention. “I’ve never felt anything like you.”

Spike chuckled. “Was a virgin when I got turned . . . means I’ll be virgin-tight forever.”

“Uh--mphurple. . . .”

“Got so much to teach you, love, so much to share with you. I’ll show you more than you ever knew existed.” There was a crackling sound, and I could feel Spike’s facial structure shift against my skin. He was in gameface again. “Say the word, and I’ll claim you right now.”

“No, Spike.” I felt guilty saying that *again*, after what had just happened, but . . . what else could I have said? ‘Yes’ would have meant giving up the few things in my life that were good and dear. How could ever I face Willow and Buffy, Giles and Oz--tell them that I’m a vampire’s fuck-toy? I couldn’t even imagine how to start that conversation. I didn’t want to.

And I didn't want to think about how Buffy would react to me bringing Spike home as my . . . boyfriend. I was sure said reaction would involve a stake, funky ninjutsu moves and Spike going *poof!*

I shivered and held him tighter. He felt good and right, two words I never expected to associate with a vampire. I knew I couldn't keep him, but I didn't want him taken away from me. Like saying no, saying yes meant I'd eventually lose him, but at least a no would keep him undusted. "I can't be your Consort."

"Why *not*, pet? You're *already* mine, in everything but blood!" Anger, impatience, frustration. He was trying to sound calm, but his body got tense and each word was a clipped growl. I should've been afraid having a pissed off vamp that close to my neck, but I wasn't.

"You *know* why not, Spike."

"Tell me, anyway."

I took a deep breath. "You gonna stop eating people?"

"No."

I thought that over and felt a disturbing lack of disturbance, or guilt. I even caught myself thinking: *well, a vamp's gotta eat.* Reptile!me agreed.

What the hell was happening to me?

What the hell was Spike *doing* to me?

"If it'd make you feel better, I could try to limit the carnage to . . . so-called evil-doers. Murderers, and the like," he grumbled, like someone making a grand concession. Maybe he was.

He'd do that for us? Little ol' us?

So much for my brain keeping a level head.

"There couldn't be enough scumbags walking around to keep a master vampire in blood for more than a few months--a year, tops."

"Hate to disillusion you, pet, but some of the worst monsters runnin' around have souls and heartbeats, just like you. And there's more of 'em than you'd think. I wouldn't starve." Spike ran his finger down my forearm,

muttering something to himself. It sounded like ‘love’s bitch’. I couldn’t tell if he meant himself or me.

“Wh-what about Buffy?”

“I can handle her--won’t let her come between me and mine.” That was definitely more growl than words. An angry vampire was in gameface right next to my neck--one who hadn’t fed in several nights.

Not a single one of my spidey-senses tingled. This was not good. What’s a Scooby without survival instincts? Demon-chow.

“She’s one of my best friends, Spike--I can pretty much guarantee that if you kill her . . . she *will* come between us.”

“Well, I won’t just stand around and wait for that bitch to stake me!” Crackle and ripple, and he was human again, controlled. “If she tries to get between us, she’s dead, that’s all there is to it, love. And another thing, I--wait. Why the bloody hell would we even go back to Sunnyhole? That place is a suburban pit, and Hellmouth aside, I see no reason to go back at all!”

“What about my friends?”

“You mean the Dudley Do-Rights who’d stake me on sight?” Spike snorts. “Sod that, pet. There’s a whole world out there--places you’ve only read about and a lot that you haven’t. Why would you wanna stay there?”

“I--” when he put it like that . . . but no. “If I was your Consort, you’d really make me choose between you and my best friends?”

Spike sat up and looked at me, very gravely. “Xander . . . choosing to become my Consort *is* the choice, one that *you* have to make. I can’t choose for you, and neither can they. If you choose me, that means that no matter what and who came before, I’m first from that point on.”

No more Willow, no more Buffy . . . no more anybody I love. Even if Spike was inclined to stay in Sunnydale, Buffy would try to kill him-or Wills’d try some spell to get rid of him-and he’d kill them. He’d try, anyway. . . .

Someone I cared about would die, no matter who won the fight.

I shook my head. “I can’t. The answer’s no.”

I expected anger, but what I got was a soft, almost inaudible sigh, then Spike slipped out of my arms and off the table. Naked, in the moonlight, he looked small, pale and young.

And even though he'd had no body heat to speak of, I felt colder for his absence.

August 10

"God, Xan, you look awful." Del rolled down the window of his jeep to say.

"Well, that's a fine how-do!" I pushed myself away from the railing that was doing more to support me than my skeleton was, and stepped out from under the motel awning, into the eye-watering sunset.

My legs got all wobbly after a few steps. Del caught my arm before I staggered, and put his hand to my forehead, frowning. "You're kinda cool."

"You only think that 'cause you didn't know me in high school." I took out a cigarette, lit it and took a long drag.

“Hi-ho, hi-ho . . . off to the mines we go.”

“The only place you’re off to is bed, kiddo.” He about-faced me and marched me back toward my room. I dug my heels in, halting us.

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” There’s an art to speaking intelligibly around a cigarette, one I was quickly mastering. “Just gimme a minute, let the nicotine hit . . . I’ll be aces.”

“You don’t *look* fine, you look exhausted.” Del frowned. “Have you eaten, today?”

“That would depend on what day this is . . . is it Wednesday?”

“No.”

“Oh. Whoa . . . maybe something from the vending machines, then. Some Nutter Butters and a Fresca. . . .”

“Xan!”

I waved away his concern and took another nice deep lungful of smoke that made me dizzy, like kissing Spike made me dizzy. Tasted about the same, too.

“Oh, yeah . . . feel that addiction take root,” I exhaled slowly, relishing the mentholated burn of cells withering and dying. “I’m fine, Del, I’m just--I haven’t been sleeping well, lately. Got a lotta shit on my mind, is all. It’s nothing.”

“*Nothing* doesn’t make you look pale and thin and tired.” He took my cigarette away and flicked it over his shoulder, towards the swollen summer sunset. “And you didn’t used to smoke this much.”

“Spike’s been a bad influence on me.” Nothing but plain, honest truth, there.

“So I’ve noticed. And how *are* things with Prince Charming?”

I hadn’t told him why I suddenly needed rides for the past few days, and he hadn’t asked, till now.

“Complicated. Messy. Hurty. Awful. One of those, all of those--who knows?” I did a shaky one-eighty and, though the ground was being bastardly enough to wobble, made a concerted shuffle back toward the jeep. Del caught up with me--not exactly a physical challenge--and put his

arm around my waist, supporting me. The world got much steadier. He was good people. Good, solid, non-wobbly people. “I think maybe I’m in love with him, a little.”

I didn’t have to see him making a face to know that he was. “That’s . . . great, isn’t it?”

“I haven’t seen him in, like, a week, so I’m thinking . . . not so much.”

And then I started crying. It came out of nowhere, like a hurricane, and shook the hell out of my body for a short eternity, before disappearing from whence it came. I wiped my face and blinked up at Del, just as surprised as he was.

“Poor Xander,” he murmured, pulling me into a hug. It felt nice so nice. I didn’t realize how tired I was till I had somebody to lean on.

“Call in sick, Xan.” Del stroked my hair, like Spike used to do. I wondered where Spike was. If I’d ever see him again. I doubted it. “Stay here and I’ll pick you up some breakfast. You’ll eat it, and go right to bed, okay? Forget about work, today.”

“Can’t . . . Mr. Anastasio’ll fire me.”

“I’ll talk to him. You’re ice cold, and you look like death, warmed over . . . if anyone needs a sick day, STAT, it’s you.”

“Whoa, you silver-tongued devil, I’m taken!” I snickered on his shoulder. Snickering felt so much like crying, that a few more tears leaked out.

Not a delicate flower, I told myself. I’m not some girl with a broken heart. I’m manly and tough and I miss Spike so much it hurts.

Thank God the world lurched and darkness ate away the edges of my vision before I had another crying jag.

Suddenly, calling in sick didn’t seem like such a bad idea.

August 17

Spike wasn’t coming back. This was an idea to which I’d resigned myself. It was time to move on.

At least that's what I told myself when Del asked me out to a movie. Moving on was saying yes, and having a good time and pretending my summer fling with the evil dead had never happened.

Moving on was of the good.

The movie was good--screwball comedy, just the kind of pick-me-up I needed . . . except it didn't really work. But I'm good at faking laughs. And spending my day off with Del was . . . nice.

After the movie, we got coffee and talked--not about Spike, not about the club, thank God--till the place emptied and the baristas started giving us evil looks.

On the ride back to my motel, we were both quiet, but it wasn't uncomfortable. It was expectant.

I was moving on.

When we pulled into the motel parking lot, Del shut off the engine and smiled at me.

"I had a really great time, Xan."

“Me, too.” *Who’s moving on? Xander’s moving on! See Xander move!*

“I don’t know if you’d wanna do this again, some time--“

“I’d love to!” My best Cordy-smile, then some artful eye-lowering. “I mean, that sounds cool.”

Del laughed put his hand over mine. I didn’t even realize I’d been beating the drum solo from *Wipe-out* on me knee till he did. Then he reached up to touch my face with fingers that had never hurt anyone, tilted my face up to his and kissed me.

It was slow and gentle, just like before, but my brain went into hyper-mode-like it’d never been kissed before, and didn’t know what to do with the data it was receiving. I didn’t even respond, and for long enough that he noticed and pulled away a little.

“Am I--is this too fast for you?” he asked uncertainly, taking my face in his hands, like I was something precious and fragile. For the thousandth time that night, I missed Spike keenly.

“Not too fast at all.” I smiled, then kissed. His lips were

soft, like Spike's, and very warm. Too warm-but I told myself to get used to it. I'd only be kissing living guys, from then on.

He didn't taste smoky (he'd quit), not coppery (he didn't drink blood), and not faintly like whiskey (he didn't drink alcohol). But he did taste dark and sweet, like coffee.

When slow and gentle wasn't doing it for me anymore, I took control of the kiss. I tried to tell myself all the 'nots' that seemed to sum up Del were something I could learn to want. So what that I didn't feel fireworks, and tingles all the way down in my toes when we touched? I was *moving on*, goddamnit, and that was all that mattered-

"Xander--*Xander*--I gotta catch my breath!" Del panted, pushing me away; his face was flushed and his eyes were bright, but there was no gold winking in them, which was jarring. "Jesus, where'd you learn to kiss like that?"

At least he didn't ask me who I was thinking about, I thought, then blushed guiltily. "I'm gonna plead the fifth on that one."

"Ah." Del laughed uncomfortably. "Open mouth, insert feet. Go, me!"

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, taking his hand and pulling it toward my face again. I had enjoyed at least that much. Besides, he was so nice, so sweet, so . . . normal. The kind of guy Wills and Buffy would choose for me, if they knew I was into guys. I had to at least *try* to make this work.

Make it work, I would. I could be seductive. Or I could’ve been if my body had taken some kind of initiative, shown some interest. So, I asked myself: WWSD?

Although, I guess the question should be, what wouldn’t Spike do? And the answer would be nothing.

I grinned, and Del grinned back, pulling me close again. “You have a beautiful smile. I’ve wanted to kiss you all summer,” he breathed, kissing me feather-light, then down my neck and across my throat. I tried to tug him closer, but the damn gear box was in the way.

At last, a problem that was easily resolved.

“Would--would you like to come back to my room, Del?”

“God, yes,” he said, leaning his forehead against mine.

“But I’m not gonna.”

For a minute, I just sat there, trying to process that. Finally, my brain gave up, muttering *does not compute*.

“Well, that makes the sense that’s not,” I said.

Del sighed and ran a hand over his hair, looking out into the night, as if there were cure-all answers to be seen. I knew for a fact that there weren’t. “Look--I can’t believe I’m saying this, but-you don’t want me. You want Spike. And while us sleeping together would be unbelievably hot and fun, afterwards, you’d only feel worse. Trust me, I know.”

“But Spike’s gone and I have to move on with my life.” I shivered. That'd sounded like Stepford!Xander.

“And you will . . . but in your own time.” Del glanced at me and smiled a little. “Getting over someone is hard work that can’t be rushed. If you try, you'll just wind up hurting yourself, and others.”

I winced. Using Del to forget Spike? Not a cool move. “I’m--Del, I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for . . . I had a great time, tonight. I like hanging out with you.”

He was making Willow’s brave-little-toaster face and I felt like scum. All I wanted was to shut myself away somewhere I couldn’t hurt decent guys--or even not-so-decent guys. I fumbled with the door handle and let myself out of the jeep. When I turned to look at Del, I caught a look of yearning on his face that made me feel even worse.

“Thanks, for . . . for everything.”

Del shrugged and smiled easily. “I said anytime. No matter what, that offer always stands.”

He sat back in the driver’s seat, and started the jeep.

“Um . . . see you tomorrow night?” I closed the door and shoved my hands in my pocket.

“Manana.”

Oh, I hated Spike--wished that he’d never come to Oxnard, and that I’d fallen for Del, first. He was the kind of guy any sane person would fall for. He was Long-Haul

Guy, and I was letting him go. Not even for Spike, but for the memory of Spike.

I was clearly certifiable.

“He *will* come back, Xan. He’d be a fool not to,” Del said, then his smile turned apologetic. “But to be honest--“ that yearning look again, hot, bright and unhidden. “I kinda hope that he doesn’t.”

Del took off.

I went to bed alone. Like I had every other night of my life.

September 2

Freedom.

Not as exciting as I'd thought.

I'd had my piece of shit car back--got it outta the shop a month early, thanks to Del's nasty bout of food-poisoning. I'd taken over his act for three nights and made \$547 in tips alone--for nearly a week. But all I'd

done was drive around to the places I used to hang out with Spike.

Then, I'd park at the rest-stop where we first had sex, and listen to the radio till I fell asleep around dawn.

I'd usually wake up sometime in midmorning, hot and thirsty, sometimes with tears on my face.

This night, however, I woke up a couple hours before dawn, in the middle of reaching for the stake I kept under the front seat. I opened my eyes just as a scrawny, skanky blonde morphed into gameface and lunged for my throat.

So much for having lost the Sunnydale Survival Instinct.

Dawn found all four doors of my car open, and a faint breeze blowing out the ashes. I was sitting on the trunk, tired and numb, still clutching the stake like I expected legions of the undead to spring up out of nowhere and decide Xander was a part of their complete breakfast.

They didn't, not that I particularly cared.

He was *gone*. I'd been having that realization for hours

and my brain had finally turned it every which way, dumbed it down, and passed the rest of me the *Cliff's Notes* version.

That fledge, slow and dumb as she was, wouldn't have gotten that close to me if he was still hanging around . . . stalking me. Watching over me.

Spike really had moved on, and I . . . had to get the hell out of Oxnard.

September 16

Sunnydale.

Home, sweet Hellmouh.

There really is no place like it, I thought, leaning on the bar, as one final drunken frat-rat insulted me, then staggered off with an equally drunk freshman girl.

The door clicked shut behind them and the place was finally empty.

I buried my face in my arms, letting the bar hold me up. I

just needed a few minutes to gather my strength, then I'd lock the doors, mop the floors, wipe down all the surfaces, restock the bar, check the alarm system, then let myself out.

Then home . . . to my lovely basement "apartment".

Don't let the aura of spiralling despair fool ya! I was living the sweet life!

I'd actually started to nod off, when the front door creaked.

What do frat-boys do when they're not drinking? I wondered. I didn't even bother looking up. Showing interest only encourages them. "Last call was half an hour ago, buddy. You don't gotta go home, but ya can't destroy your liver here."

"Imagine my surprise," a dark, familiar voice said. "When I picked up a familiar scent in this shithole town."

I sat up so fast I got whip-lash. Standing in the doorway, sleek, powerful and deadly, was William the Bloody, one-quarter of the Scourge of Europe, the Microscope Menace--

Spike.

"Thought maybe you had a long-lost twin, or somethin' . . . but it's you.. The Slayer's boy." There was no warmth in his flickery, sun-sky eyes, no joke twitching the corner of his mouth as he stalked toward me, duster flapping. He looked every inch the predator he was and I'd never found him more . . . beautiful.

Yeah, I'd moved on so well.

"Spike--" when did my mouth get so dry? "What are you doing here?"

"It's Xander somethin'-or-other, isn't it?" He smirked and sat on the stool closest to where I seemed to be rooted to the floor.

How do you know that when it comes to the great romance movie that is life, you're nothing more than the comic relief? When you fall in love with the villain, and then *stay* in love with him, long after he's stopped loving you.

"What--what do you want?" I asked, swallowing all the

other things I wanted to say. Now wasn't the time for any of them, and Sunnydale certainly wasn't the place. We were back on the Hellmouth, and it was business as usual.

His eyes ticked to my neck and the evilicious smile cranked up a notch. "A drink would be lovely, mate, thanks for offering."

"I meant something alcoholic." *Let's both pretend we don't know the thought of you drinking from me is making me hard, shall we?* "On the house for you, Big Bad."

Spike frowned, and glanced behind me. "Jack, neat. Ta, Xanderrr," he said curtly.

A vampire frowning at a white hat who stupidly left his stakes in his jacket pocket? Not of the good. I really didn't wanna turn my back on him, but I didn't want to get sucked into whatever game he was trying to play. If he wanted to kill me, there was nothing I'd be able to do to stop him, even if I had ten stakes lined up on the bar. Fear and worry was pointless.

"Jack-neat, comin' right up." I turned my back on him to

look for the Jack. I hadn't been working there long enough to know how to actually mix drinks, let alone the system for stocking bottles on the shelves and racks. (I'd suggested alphabetizing them, but received only lank, disdainful stares).

Absolut, Rumpleminz., Cuervo, Cuervo Gold, Blackhouse, and--okay, this is a bottle of drain cleaner. God, what a pit. Stolies, Jim Beam, Captain Morg--GUH!

"Uh . . . Spike?" My voice was extra squeaky.

"Yeah, pet?"

I shivered, and leaned back in his arms. He held me tighter, making a contented sound I used to call a purr, and he used to tickle me mercilessly for calling a purr.

"Wh-what are you d-doing?"

He kissed my neck and shoulder, and even though I had on two shirts, those kisses scorched my skin.

"Tried bein' your enemy again, and it doesn't feel right. Tried not carin' about you one way, or the other, and that didn't feel right, either. So I'm going back to what *did* feel right . . . what'll always feel right." He turned me to

face him. That mask of contempt and menace was gone like it'd never been, and something in me relaxed completely, after six weeks of being tied in knots.

So, maybe he hadn't moved on.

"*This* feels right, Xander, and I won't give it up without a hell of a fight," he said, searching my eyes intently. "I've been love's bitch since--a hundred years before you were even born. I'm still love's bitch. You want me to eat only bad guys? I'll do that. You want me to stay in Sunnyhole and make nice with the Slayer and the Scooby Gang? I'll do that, too, and count myself lucky to be with you. You want--"

I kissed him before he promised me the moon, or burst into song, or something. His mouth was warm and blood-salty, but I didn't care. I kissed him until I had to break it, or pass out.

"The only thing I want is you."

Spike was silent for so long, just stroking my back and staring into my eyes, that I wondered if, after all his declaration--after *mine*--he was having second thoughts.

"You mean that?"

"Want me to put it in simpler terms, Special Ed?" I laid my head on his shoulder, holding him as tight as I could. "I. Love. You. Claim me."

"What? Really?" He pushed me back to look me in the eye again. He seemed slightly disappointed, as if he'd expected more of a fight. "You really, *really* mean it?"

"Mm-hmm." I unbuttoned the first few buttons of my Hawaiian shirt and tilted my head to the side. "C'mon, before some frat-boy wanders in looking to do shots."

"But . . . here? You want me to claim you . . . *here*."

"Sure. Is there a problem?"

"Well--no, but--look, I'm not the most romantic sod on the planet, and even I find this place utterly lacking in atmosphere." I think he was actually pouting. I rolled my eyes. Vampires, and their ritual to-dos.

"Fine, claim me anywhere you want--the Hoover Dam, The Eiffel Tower, Toronto, Istanbul, Jakarta, Timbuktu--wait, that's a real place, isn't it?"

Spike nodded, warily. I smiled. "Cool. I don't really care where you claim me, so long as you *claim me*."

"You're sure, love?" Golden eyes, now, with flashes of blue. "There's no givesies backsies once you're mine."

I thought about how empty and numb I'd felt, how lost and directionless without since he left me. I thought about feeling like that for the rest of my safe, normal, boring, mediocre, average life.

I kissed him again, holding onto him super-tight. My mistake had been letting him go, in the first place. I didn't plan on repeating it.

"Love you so much."

"Then do it. Do *anything*, just don't leave again," I murmured, pressing my hard-on against his and offering my neck again. He swore, his hands sliding down to my ass.

"You really want me to claim you *now*?"

I nodded.

"On a bar-top?"

"Mm-hmm."

Spike thought it over for a moment, then grinned. "If one of those frat-boys walks in during, do I get to kill him?"

"Knock yourself out."

Spike had me on my back, on the bar-top so fast I got dizzy. A second later, my legs were dangling over the sides and he was kneeling between them, gameface flickering in and out like tv reception.

As quickly as I opened my arms he was in them, kissing me, then nuzzling my neck. I whimpered when fangs nipped my neck promisingly, without breaking skin. Yet.

"Just one more thing, nummy--"

"Anything. . . ."

I could feel his slow smile against my Adam's-apple and my brain whispered, *uh-oh*. Reptile! me hissed at the sky and ran for cover. My body was already busy wrapping

my legs around his waist. Spike chuckled evilly.

"Let me be the one to tell the Slayer?"

The End