

Pairing: Spike/Xander

Rating: NC-17

Disclaimer: I'm not Joss

Summary: Several years after Sunnydale, Xander is a negotiator for the Watchers' Council who's avoided commitment and who leads a happy life. When he returns to HQ in Reno, he discovers that Buffy has hired a new teacher for the Slayers-in-training: an Englishman who tortures his students with terrible amounts of work. Can Xander find a way to make the teacher relax a little?

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Hot for Teacher

by

[Whichclothes](#)

Part One

“How 'bout it?” The blond was lean and wiry, long pale lashes and gray-green eyes, a smattering of freckles over the bridge of his nose.

Xander didn't pause in his dancing. His feet knew their own way and his hips felt loose and agile. Guitar chords and the singer's rough voice moved along his spine like fingernails scratching. “Species?” he asked, because he wasn't a complete idiot.

The blond grinned a grin that grew sharp and his eyes turned amber and feline.

“No nibbling,” Xander said.

The blond seemed to consider this restriction for a moment, but then Xander pressed forward just a little, allowing the vamp to feel the bulge in his crotch. “Long as that's not a stake in your

pocket,” the vampire said in a cowboy drawl.

“Nope. I’m just happy to see you.”

Xander grabbed the vampire’s hand and dragged him through the crowd of swaying scaled, furry, slimy, and tentacled bodies toward the back of the room, down a long hallway where the music faded to thuds and thumps, into the first room with an open door. It was a small room, more a closet than anything, and it was bare except for the light fixture overhead—one of the two bulbs burned out—but it would do just fine.

The vampire wasted no time at all in dropping to his knees and nuzzling into Xander’s groin. Xander smiled, unzipped, and fished out his dick.

The blond gave a low whistle. “Holy shit! Is that thing registered?”

“In six states.”

But when the vampire licked his lips and leaned

forward, Xander stopped him with a firm hand on his shoulder. “No fangs,” he reminded, because safe sex meant something else altogether in a place like this.

“Not even just a li’l bit? Lemme tell you, pardner, ain’t nothing as fine—”

“No fangs,” repeated Xander, and took a step backward.

“Yeah, okay, okay.” The vampire scooted closer and slipped his lips over Xander’s cock. The relative coolness of him felt good against Xander’s overheated skin, which was one of the reasons why Xander was willing to fuck vampires despite the obvious risks. The coolness, plus the fact that they looked pretty much human. Xander was an open-minded guy, but creatures with eight eyes or who wore half their insides on the outside were more likely to give him the wiggins than give him a happy.

This vampire was definitely making him happy. Too happy, almost, and Xander had to push the

blond away from him with a *pop*. “Now or never, buddy,” Xander said.

The vamp rose to his feet. He was already shirtless and he didn't bother to kick off his pointed boots; he simply flicked open a few buttons and pushed his Levi's down to his ankles. That would have hobbled an ordinary man, but the vampire somehow managed to look graceful as he turned and walked to the wall, placed his palms on the drywall near his head, and waggled his shapely ass.

“Giddyup,” Xander muttered.

Most demons didn't need—or want—a lot of prep work. So Xander spat into his hand, added a little of his own saliva to the vampire spit already on his dick, and dove right in.

“Holy *fuck*,” the vampire howled. Xander grunted his agreement. And hey, he was a giving sort of guy, so while he gripped one hip with his left hand he snaked his right around and grabbed the vampire's cock, which was already

sticky with pre-come.

And then Xander's back pocket began to play the Eagles. "Fucking cell phone," he growled. He didn't bother to answer it; instead, his hips pistoned and skin slapped and the blond gasped and moaned, and within minutes they were both coming hard.

The vampire showed an unexpected dash of chivalry as he produced a red bandana from his pants pocket and used it to clean off Xander's hand.

And then they were both zipping and buttoning, and the vampire tipped his imaginary Stetson. "Good ride," he said. "You ever wanna do that again, well, you know where to find me."

Xander nodded and smiled, enjoying the way the post-orgasmic endorphins were mixing with the alcohol in his bloodstream, making him feel sleepy and content, like a cat by a fire.

On the way back across the dance floor, Xander

groped a few old pals and waved to a few more, and then he was out on the shocking quiet of the sidewalk, where Sheila the bouncer gave him a low five before he turned homeward. Xander was foolhardy with an occasional dash of suicidal, but he wasn't stupid. He had walked instead of driving. His apartment was only about a mile away, and the chill of the Illinois night felt almost as pleasant as vampire skin. It wasn't even a bad neighborhood, just slightly down at the heels so that nobody really minded a bar that catered to an unusual crowd, as long as the patrons kept the noise and the mess and the sex inside. Most of the other shops were closed at night anyway. Xander wondered sometimes if the people who went to the nail salon and the car parts shop had any idea what went on right next door after hours.

Turning off the main drag, Xander passed small apartment complexes and little bungalows with plastic toys in their front yards. He walked by a grade school that looked a little tired, but the parking lot had been freshly blacktopped and the swings and basketball hoops were in good

shape. Finally he reached a remnant from when this area had all been farmland: a big house that was now a triplex. A couple of college students lived on the top floor, a dental hygienist was beneath them, and in the walk-in basement lived a one-eyed member of the Watchers' Council.

The entrance to Xander's apartment was in the back. He unlocked the door and let himself inside, kicking off his shoes and sauntering to the kitchen without bothering to turn on a light. He opened the fridge and pulled out a gallon of milk, which he guzzled straight from the carton. He eyed the leftover KFC in its jaunty red and white bucket but decided he wasn't hungry, so he shut the fridge and padded back to the other room. He spent a few minutes rearranging the pillows on the couch to his satisfaction and clicking through the TV channels until he found one of those cooking competition shows, at which point he lay back with a satisfied sigh.

He was just beginning to doze off when his phone rang again. *Witchy Woman*. He sighed—

not so happily this time—and wiggled around until he could fish it from his pocket. “Yeah, Will?”

“Nice way to greet your BFF, buster.”

“It’s late.” He yawned to prove his point.

“It wasn’t so late when I called before.”

“I was out.”

“Hmm,” she replied, knowing perfectly well what that meant but not wanting to resurrect that old fight again. Willow was of the opinion that Xander should Find Someone and Settle Down. *Thirty-five*, she kept saying after his last birthday, as if it were a magic number. Well, she was all good with her cute life partner and their adorable house and their cats and the garden with the herb spirals and the tumbles of wild roses. But Xander wasn’t the Settling Down kind.

“Do you need something, Will? Or were you just afraid I was missing my weekly dose of

disapproval?”

“Those papers are finally drawn up. We’re gonna overnight ‘em to you tomorrow so you can collect the signatures.”

“Oh. That didn’t take too long.”

“I hear you were a good negotiator.”

Xander smiled, remembering the L’Karthas’ pretty representative—more or less human in looks, but with tiger-striped skin and cute little antennae things on her head. The negotiations had been especially fun this time, so much so that she and Xander had deliberately drawn them out longer than necessary, just for the pleasure of their interactions. “Yeah, I did all right I guess.”

“There’s nothing else pressing going on here. Are you gonna stick around Illinois or bring the manuscripts back to us yourself?”

He looked around the room while he thought

this over. He'd chosen this place mostly because it was quiet during the day, when he was usually asleep. It was comfortable but pretty cramped; just a tiny kitchen and a larger room where the couch pulled out into a bed. He'd been happy enough here but didn't feel any particular ties. "I'll probably come back. It's been a while since I saw you and the rest of the gang."

"That'll be nice. We'll hang out. Oh! And there's this new woman in my coven, Thea, and she's cute plus she loves sci-fi and—"

"Not interested."

"Um ... remember that Watcher? Bradley? I kinda thought you and he had a few moments—"

"We screwed a few times, Will. Like, six years ago."

"Those were moments, right? So he just broke up with his boyfriend and—"

“No matchmaking. Promise me.”

Her sigh was long and drawn out. “Fine.”

When the phone call ended, Xander clicked off the TV, yawned, and wandered into his bathroom, which was as small and minimalist as the rest of the place. He stripped off the jeans and t-shirt that smelled of beer and sweat and sex, had a satisfyingly long piss, and brushed his teeth. Finally he yanked off the eye patch and gave himself a good long look in the full-length mirror that hung on the door. Not bad, he decided. The missing eye didn't seem to put anyone off—in fact he'd been told more than once that the patch was sexy. There were gray sprinkles in his hair but he wasn't going bald. His muscles were well-defined, his stomach was pretty trim, and his cock, well, that was always a crowd-pleaser. Maybe he looked like a guy who'd been around the block a few times, but they were interesting blocks and that was okay. He had no problems getting laid when he felt like it, which was often.

Maybe part of the reason Xander looked good was because he felt good. After Sunnydale he'd given up on fighting—his limited battle skills grew even worse after he lost the eye—and he didn't even make a stab at being Research Guy. For a while he'd been at loose ends, doing nothing more useful than fixing things that broke. But then a group of Gerantio demons had come by to haggle over a mystical knickknack and they'd taken a shine to Xander. Thanks to Xander's demon magnetism, a good deal had been made. After that, Xander became the Council's official negotiator and it turned out he was damned good at it. He enjoyed it too. Against all odds and contrary to nearly everyone's expectations, he was a success.

With another yawn and a smile of satisfaction, Xander headed to the other room to pull out his bed.

Part Two

Out of old habit, Xander crept quietly into the Reno HQ and braced himself for attack. The attack didn't come, of course. Dawn had long since grown up and left the nest—happily married and living in Connecticut—and her welcoming squeals no longer echoed off the stone walls. No baby Slayers, either. The ones he'd come to know well in Sunnydale and the couple of years afterward had moved on to their own territories. A few had died. There were new Slayers now, always another crop of fresh-faced girls ready to learn how to kick ass, but he hadn't spent enough time at HQ to get to know them very well.

Two young Slayer-in-training were sitting in comfy chairs in the lobby of what had once been a hotel and casino, giggling over their laptops. They tensed a little when he came in but then relaxed when they recognized him. "Hi, Mr. Harris," said the chubby one with the pretty dimples.

Wondering when he became Mr. Harris, Xander

smiled at them. "Hey. If you guys are supposed to be on guard duty you're not doing a very good job of it."

The other girl, all bony elbows and knees and a long black braid, shrugged. "Willow put a spell on the door. If you can get in, you prolly belong here."

He probably should have chastised them for their lax attitude. Complacency like that got you killed. But he was already Mr. Harris and he wasn't too eager to become Cranky Ragging Mr. Harris, so he decided he'd have a word with Buffy over the matter later. Let her deal with the teenagers.

He shook his head at them. "Where's Willow? And Buffy?"

"Atlanta. They should be back tonight or tomorrow, I think," said the chubby girl.

Xander sighed. It seemed like there was never a break, not even for a moment. He wondered

sometimes how much longer Buffy would stay on top of her game. Thirty-five wasn't ancient, but it wasn't eighteen either. She didn't seem to have any intention to let the younger girls take over, and Xander wasn't going to be the one to try to convince her that she should consider early retirement. He preferred his skin intact, thank you very much.

He gave the girls a little wave with his free hand and lugged his suitcase up the stairs. After a few near-apocalypses he'd become very good at traveling light. He didn't own much and didn't feel the need to acquire more stuff—although he experienced a faint twinge every now and then as he remembered his comic book collection and his *Star Trek* collector's plates, all of which were now dust at the bottom of Sunnydale Crater. He could buy more, he supposed. Maybe someday he would.

His suite was pretty much as he'd left it a year or so ago, although he smiled when he noticed that someone must have dusted recently and made up the bed. He'd set up the rooms for himself

when they first settled in Reno. There was plenty of space for everyone, and he'd claimed a corner—knocking down a wall, giving himself a little more square footage, expanding the bathroom. He didn't keep many personal belongings in the suite and it never quite felt like home, but he was comfortable there. It was nice to have a home base.

He set his suitcase on the forest green comforter and unpacked his shirts, his jeans, his underwear. He brought his toiletries into the bathroom. And then he kicked off his shoes, lay down on the bed, and clicked on the TV. Nothing much was on, but that was okay. Maybe later he'd go out—he knew a few good clubs not too far away.

He woke up feeling muzzy-headed and slightly disoriented, and it took him a moment to remember where he was. Ah. HQ sweet HQ.

When Willow wasn't trying to talk him into Finding Someone she concentrated on persuading him to settle more permanently. "At

least hang some pictures on your walls," she'd say. "Buy some knickknacks."

She didn't seem to understand that he *liked* his life. He was footloose and fancy-free. Well, maybe not quite. But he had plenty of company when he felt like it—and when he didn't feel like company he didn't have to worry about anyone else's expectations. He was in demand. He got to travel to interesting places and meet interesting not-quite-people and hardly anyone tried to kill him, which was a nice change of pace from his younger years.

He was Xander Harris, Bachelor Extraordinaire, the James Bond of the demon set. Only without the cool gadgets. Maybe he should talk to someone about getting a few gadgets.

Yawning and stretching, he ambled to the bathroom. He brushed his hair and teeth but decided to skip going out tonight. He was still a little beat from the long drive. His stomach reminded him, however, that he hadn't eaten anything in a while, so he decided to head to the

kitchen.

One of the good things about staying at HQ was that he rarely had to cook for himself. There was an enormous commercial kitchen, a relic of the days when the casino had served \$9.99 prime rib buffets, and almost any time of day or night someone was there, scrounging up something to eat. Tonight was no different—four girls and one boy were sitting around a table, talking and laughing and eating enchiladas.

"Mind if I join you?" Xander asked.

"Nope!" answered a tall girl with frizzy hair and too much eyeliner. "Dig in."

The enchiladas smelled good. He filled a plate, snagged a can of Coke from one of the fridges, and sat down with the little group. "Mm!" he enthused with his mouth full. He'd been eating a lot of fast food and nuked stuff lately, and this was a major improvement. He gobbled more than his share, only half listening to the conversation around him. They were kids. They

were worried about all the usual teenage stuff—who was crushing on whom, whether they were cool enough, what to wear, what music sucked. He wanted to tell them to stop stressing about that shit, because either they'd end up dying a demony death or else they'd survive and hit their thirties and then none of it would matter anymore. But he knew they wouldn't listen to him. He probably sounded like the grownups in the Snoopy cartoons.

The boy and one of the girls gathered the empty plates and dumped them into one of the huge dishwashers. Xander wrapped the leftovers in foil and stuck them in a fridge. "You guys doing something exciting tonight? Patrolling maybe?" He was still pretty tired, but he hadn't had a good patrol in a long time. It might be fun, for old time's sake.

But the kids were shaking their heads. "No, dude," said the girl with the frizzy brown hair. "We have too much homework. Trigonometry and *literature*. Ugh. I'd rather get almost killed by monsters."

He remembered the feeling. "Oh, come on," he said. "I bet Mrs. Dillard will cut you some slack." Mrs. Dillard had been hired years ago to teach any of the Slayers or baby Watchers who hadn't finished high school yet. She drank a lot but she was willing to put up with students who sometimes came to class with demon goo stains on their clothes or vamp ash in their hair, so that was cool.

"Mrs. Dillard hit a big-ass jackpot at Circus Circus and moved to Maui. We have a *new* teacher."

The boy nodded morosely. "He's this cranky old guy with a stick way up his British ass. Piles on the assignments and gets super pissy if we're not perfect at everything."

Xander found himself grinning hugely. Last he heard, Giles was sunk into a peaceful retirement in England, complete with horses and endless stacks of musty books. It would be good to see him again. "Want me to come to class tomorrow? Maybe I can talk the old geezer into

lightening up."

"He won't listen," said the frizzy-haired girl.

"He's hella stubborn."

"Maybe I can persuade him." Xander winked.

"You'd be surprised what he's hiding under all that tweed."

The kids looked doubtful, but they wished him good night and hurried away. Xander found himself somewhat at loose ends, not quite in the mood to sleep but too tired to accomplish much of anything. He ended up wandering aimlessly around HQ, making note of several things that could use fixing. He hadn't done construction work for a while and he missed it. Maybe tomorrow he'd do something about those wonky baseboards in the lobby or the loose hinges on the training room doors.

As he wandered, he pictured Giles standing in front of a small crowd of teens, frowning through the lenses of his bifocals, making sarcastic little comments every time they fucked

up. The task was probably good for old Rupert; kept him from overdosing on tea and crumpets.

Finally, Xander headed upstairs. His bed was mussed from his earlier nap. It was a big bed. California King. He wondered if maybe he could find someone to share it for a while. The quick fucks at the bars were fine for getting his rocks off, but lately he'd been thinking he wanted something more. A little consistency.

Companionship. He'd even seriously considered an offer from a really sweet Oltlanx demon—and Oltlanxi were hermaphrodites, which was really the best of both worlds—but that demon also had a half dozen parents, and Xander had decided that six mothers-fathers-in-law were more than he could handle. Xander had long ago resigned himself to the inevitability of demon lovin', but he could at least hope for something a little less complicated.

"Okay then," he said out loud to the empty room. "Porn it is." He booted up his laptop, unbuttoned his jeans, and lay back for a relaxing evening.

Part Three

He woke up uncharacteristically early, just as the sun was beginning to turn the sky violet. Maybe he was still on Illinois time or maybe it was the nap and the early bedtime the night before. He certainly hoped he didn't make a habit of early rising—it wouldn't fit in very well with his lifestyle.

But he was awake, so he threw on an old T-shirt and sweatpants, laced up his Adidas, and headed down to the lobby. The place was deserted except for one of the Watchers-in-training, a chubby girl who had a huge textbook propped open in front of her. She gave him a half wave before bending over her book again.

The early-morning air was chilly and smelled of sagebrush and chaparral. Tiny creatures scuttered away from his feet as he began to jog:

crickets maybe, or rodents that were slightly overdue for bedding down for the day. A rough path had been cleared behind the building, leading westward up a gradual slope. The Slayers used it for training purposes, because although there was a well-equipped gym at HQ, sometimes nothing beat a good old-fashioned run.

Xander didn't think while he ran. He didn't listen to music—didn't even bring his iPod. He simply concentrated on moving his body: flexing his muscles, pumping his arms and legs, pushing air into and out of his lungs. When he was younger, he'd never enjoyed exercise, maybe because most of it consisted of running for his life from bloodthirsty demons. But he'd gradually grown to like it. It made him feel strong, even though he knew the tiniest, greenest Slayer in the bunch could kick his ass without even breaking a sweat. Running was like sex, really—both involved using your body as a machine for pleasure, and both left him feeling contentedly drained afterwards. Maybe even the same chemicals went rushing through his brain during

both activities. Endorphins? He should ask Willow when she got back; she'd know. Or better yet, he could ask Giles today. Preferably in the middle of class. He did so love to see Giles flustered.

With that happy thought, Xander continued to the top of the ridge. He spent several minutes up there, admiring the view and catching his breath. The sun had risen in earnest and lizards were beginning to head for their favorite warming rocks. He decided to go for a swim that afternoon. That was another perk of living in a former hotel-casino: the huge outdoor pool and a party-sized Jacuzzi.

The downhill journey took only a few minutes. He was sweaty and huffing as he re-entered the lobby, but the girl with the book barely glanced up. "Coffee?" he wheezed.

She shrugged disinterestedly. "Sometimes Tammy gets up early and makes a pot. Dunno if she did today."

He decided to shower before investigating the possibilities for caffeine and calories.

The water pressure in his bathroom wasn't very good. Sometimes minerals clogged the plumbing, especially when he hadn't used it in a while. He'd have to check it out later. Plumbing jobs weren't his top choice, but boy he hated a trickly shower.

Clean, shaved, combed, and dressed, he went to the kitchen and was overjoyed to discover coffee *and* cinnamon rolls. They were the kind you bought in tubes at the grocery store, but they were nice and hot and sticky. He ate one, saw that nobody else was around to yell at him, and gobbled another. Maybe he'd make brownies or something later to make up for the minor theft. In fact, now that he thought of it, he should go to the store. There was a mini fridge in his room that was calling to be filled with beer. While he was at it he could do a hardware store run. The thought of that made him grin. He loved hardware stores—they were one of his true vices. He browsed the nails and

power tools the way some women drooled over shoes, and he loved to stand in the lumber aisles and inhale deeply.

So, he was a man of simple pleasures. Nothing wrong with that.

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He didn't return to HQ until midafternoon, and then it took a while for him to unload his SUV. Not only did he have Heineken, but also a couple of new tools, some drill bits, and three kinds of caulk. You could never have too much caulk. "Or too much cock," he said out loud, then chortled at his own joke.

Finally, however, he made his way down a hallway to the former meeting room they used as a classroom. Xander had helped set the room up, back when they were still settling in. He'd installed a chalkboard, whiteboard, and screen; he'd wired up a data projector and DVD player; he'd torn up the ugly old carpet and put down hard-wearing vinyl instead. He'd even installed a

bank of large windows, because he felt it was every student's God-given right to get distracted during class by the great outdoors. Now he stood outside the room, listening to a male voice drone on, but the door was too thick for him to make out what Giles was saying. It might not even be Giles, actually—it could be one of the students—but Xander doubted it. The tone said Teacher.

Xander waited until there was a slight pause in the speech. Then he adjusted his eyepatch, put on his smirkiest smile, and flung the door open. "Mind if I crash this class?" he asked loudly as he sailed inside.

And then he saw who was standing at the front of the room.

Oh, the teacher was wearing tweed all right—a tweed blazer, in fact, with corduroy elbow patches. And the teacher had wire-framed glasses perched on his nose, and chalk dust on his hands and trousers. His hair was standing up a little, as if he'd been running fingers through it

in annoyance. He had impeccable posture and he was British. But he was not Giles.

"Spike!" Xander squawked.

"Harris?" Spike squawked back.

"You're dead!"

"And you're a bloody idiot, but I don't hold that against you."

While Xander stood there, open-mouthed, the class erupted into talk and laughter. Erupted, that is, until Spike took a step forward and pointed his chalk at the girl who sat closest to him. "Enough of this nonsense! There will be silence at once or I'll assign ten extra pages of maths tonight."

Xander might have expected mutiny, or at least groans of protest. But the students only rolled their eyes and straightened in their seats, every one of them looking like the world's most attentive scholar.

Xander finally found his tongue. "Spike, what the *fuck*?"

Spike whirled to glare at him. "I won't have language like that in my classroom. And I'll thank you not to interrupt my lessons again. We were just discussing the influences of the Charter of Liberties upon the Magna Carta. Sylvia is going to translate the first twenty clauses from Latin into your bastardized version of English. Aren't you, Sylvia?"

Sylvia looked as if she'd rather go ten rounds with a Chorigo, but she nodded obediently.

"Right then," said Spike. "So unless you intend to attempt to instill some education into that head of yours, Harris—and a rather pointless attempt that would be—you'll be leaving us now."

"But... but... you're *here*. And you're not Giles."

Spike sighed and addressed the students. "You

see what happens when you allow demons to play rugby with your skull once too often? Well, not that Mr. Harris was all that bright to begin with."

Xander decided the sarcasm wasn't helping him figure out what was going on. "We need to talk," he said firmly to Spike. "As soon as you're done here."

"I shall await our meeting with bated breath."

"Yeah? Not like you need to breathe anyway, Corpseman."

Spike narrowed his eyes and looked as if he meant to reply, but then one of the students shifted in her seat, distracting him. Xander shook his head a few times, confirmed that the vampire wasn't a mirage, and beat a hasty exit. It looked like somebody had some 'splainin' to do.

It wasn't until Xander was in his own room, phone cradled in his palm, that it hit him. The

unforgiving sun of the high desert had been pouring through the classroom windows, and Spike had been lecturing right in the middle of a puddle of light—with nary a smoke wisp in sight.

"What the *fuck*?" Xander demanded as soon as his call connected.

"I'm sorry," Willow replied, sounding more annoyed than contrite. There was a lot of noise on her end, as if she stood in the middle of a crowd. "We're on our way home right now. Red-eye. I'll see you in the morning. It was a Tueddii infestation. Boy, those things wear the weirdest hats."

"That's not— It's cool, Will. I'll see you guys tomorrow. But *Spike*?"

"Ohhh. That."

"Yeah, that." He collapsed onto his bed and fell back, staring up at a ceiling that could use repainting.

"It's... well, we sort of ran into him a while back. When we were doing that thing in San Diego? And he was looking a little lost, I guess, and he was pretty much a hero at the end there, so—"

"At the *end*, Will. Buffy said he burned up with all those Neandervamps."

A muffled voice announced something on Willow's end. "Hey, that's us," she said. "We're boarding. So Spike did do the final death thing in Sunnydale, only it, it wasn't so final after all. He got revamped in LA not too much later and, and got mixed up in that lawyer thing with Angel."

Xander frowned. He'd heard about the lawyer thing, although not in detail. He knew a lot of people died but Angel supposedly won anyway. Last Xander heard, Angel was hanging out on a mountaintop in Nepal, trying to find inner peace. Hah. Good luck with that. "But Spike's... he's *alive*, isn't he? Not revamped but devamped."

"Yeah. That was some kind of redemption thing.

Xan, I gotta go now. They're calling my row. Why don't you ask Spike to tell you his story himself? I'll see you tomorrow."

He grumbled something in reply and she ended the call.

He spent a long time after that glaring at the ceiling. He wasn't even sure what he was pissed off about. It wasn't that he cared whether Spike was dust or not. Xander hadn't really given him much thought over the past years. If pushed, Xander would have to admit that Spike had been a hero there at the end, but even then he was snarky and cocky and annoying as hell. But still, you'd think someone would have mentioned Spike's existence over the past months, at least in passing. He had been Xander's roomie after all—twice.

When ceiling-scowling failed to produce satisfactory results, Xander decided he might as well get some work done. He rose, grabbed his toolbox, and went into the bathroom. He spent a half hour swearing at the shower plumbing,

which made him feel a little better. But it also made him feel hot and grimy, so he changed to his swim trunks and headed to the pool. He was relieved to discover no Slayers or Watchers lounging on the deck. Probably they were taking a post-educational nap, or maybe Spike had given them that extra math homework after all.

Xander dumped his towel on a chair, took a few minutes to slather on some sunscreen, and then slipped off his patch before walking to the water's edge and gazing into its depths.

"You're meant to paddle in it, not stare at it."

Xander jumped and whirled around, almost falling into the pool in the process. Spike was sitting on a chair so deep in the shadows of the building that Xander hadn't seen him. The former vampire had removed his jacket and loosened his tie, but was still overdressed in a white button-down, wool trousers, and shiny black shoes. He had an open book in his hands.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Xander.

"Relaxing, berk. Trying to clear my head of the rubbish those children spout from their mouths and their crabbed little hands. Has this bloody colony given up altogether on teaching its spawn the proper use of apostrophes?"

Xander had always been a little shaky about apostrophes himself. "Punctuation is not gonna stop an apocalypse, Spike."

"It might. Someone might bollocks up a spell and instead of averting mayhem he might turn his colleagues into banana slugs. I've seen it happen."

"Fine. Little squiggly marks are gonna save the world. But why are you skulking in the shade?"

"'M not *skulking*. I sunburn easily. English complexion."

"Yeah, but they invented this thing called sunscreen." Xander pointed at his bottle and tried not to laugh at the thought of Spike with

white goo smeared over his nose and smelling like coconut.

But Spike frowned and muttered something that sounded like *allergic*.

Xander decided that a little more weirdness hardly mattered at this point and he turned and dove into the pool. The water was a little on the chilly side, but that was okay. He hadn't had a chance for a swim in several months, and it felt wonderful to float, to propel himself forward with powerful kicks and strokes. Swimming was another way he enjoyed his body, another way to just *be* for a while, to enjoy his own strength and coordination.

He did laps until his arms began to ache, and then he hauled himself partly out of the water, propping his arms and upper body against the rounded concrete edge. Spike was watching him. Maybe had been for a while, because the book was face-down in his lap.

"You're good at that," observed Spike.

Xander blinked and pushed his hair away from his eye. "Yeah."

"I never learnt to swim properly. Mother took me to Brighton twice but she was afraid I'd catch a chill or get swept away. She wouldn't allow me in past my knees."

There was something odd about Spike's tone, something soft and not at all Spikish. It reminded Xander of one of Spike's really bad moments after he'd returned to Sunnydale with a soul. The vampire had wandered into the living room—naked, and with bloody claw marks on his chest—while Xander had been trying to watch *Battlestar Galactica* on TV. "Can't abide what I've become," Spike had said in an accent that sounded like it belonged to Giles. "This monster's skin I wear... it's too tight, you see. Too many screams stuffed in here with me." He'd collapsed to his knees and began to sob and rip his fingernails across his pecs. Xander had sat on the couch, not knowing how to respond.

"My dad made sure I knew how to swim," Xander replied now, glad that this newer version of Spike was dry-eyed and blood-free. And clothed. "When I was six he kept dumping me in Uncle Rory's pool until I figured out how to dog-paddle. The fancy stuff came later." He wasn't sure why he shared that memory.

Spike gave him a long look but didn't say anything.

"Why are you here?" Xander asked after a long silence. "At HQ, I mean. Not poolside."

"They needed someone to teach. I can't... not good for much, these days. Can't fight worth shite. But I've learnt more than these fools ever will, and I can bloody well beat at least a bit of knowledge into their skulls."

That sort of made sense. What kind of job could an ex-vamp get? It wasn't like his resume was going to open a whole lot of employment opportunities. "What did you do before? The

first time you were human, I mean."

The question made Spike's frown deepen. "I was a solicitor."

"You were a *lawyer*?" Xander barely quelled the urge to hoot with laughter, and he managed to not make a joke comparing the legal profession to vampires.

Spike picked up his book. "Sod off."

Xander allowed his lower body to float backwards a little and he kicked his feet a few times. He considered swimming more laps. Instead, he said, "Sorry. I guess it was pretty hard to transition from demon." Now, where did that empathy come from?

Maybe Spike wondered the same thing, because he tilted his head and gave Xander a skeptical look over the rim of the book. "What are *you* doing here then?"

"Nothing. A break between jobs."

"I heard you fancy yourself some sort of diplomat."

Xander shrugged. "That's a fancier title than anyone's given me, but all right. I negotiate stuff. I figure I can save more lives that way than trying to slay."

"Rumor has it that you've quite a habit of bedding the paranormal."

If Spike had intended that comment to upset Xander, he was off the mark. Xander only grinned. "Only the pretty ones and we rarely make it to a bed."

"Why?" Spike asked, narrow-eyed.

"Giving in to the inevitable. Besides, lot of supernatural beings make really good lovers, and the one fully human girl I slept with was Faith." He shuddered at the memory.

"Heard it's blokes nowadays."

"Mostly. Sometimes a girl for variety but mostly I've turned to the gayer side. Why the interest in my sex life?"

"Trying to suss out what makes you tick. You're an odd one."

Xander's smile grew. "Nah. I'm just the donut boy. Boring old Xander Harris." And he twisted around, plunged underwater, and kicked off from the side of the pool.

Part Four

Buffy shoved her empty suitcase into her overflowing closet and used Slayer strength to force the door shut. She walked over to the little couch where Xander and Willow were relaxing. "Scooch," she ordered. A certain amount of shifting and elbowing ensued, at the end of which Xander found himself wedged firmly

between Buffy and Willow. It was a familiar feeling. Comfy.

"God, I hate airports," Buffy moaned.

"I told you I could zap us. Not *all* of us, the rest of the gang is still stuck with the friendly skies, but I could just—"

"No." Buffy interrupted Willow very firmly. "A world of no. Last time you tried that I picked up ten pounds by the time you reconstituted me. Took me two weeks to fit back in my jeans."

"All right," said Willow sadly. Xander had the impression they'd had this discussion before.

Buffy's suite was much larger than his, and more crowded with... stuff. Aside from her bed, dresser, and nightstands, she had a couch and a couple of armchairs, a vanity table covered with bottles of nail polish, and a big trunk with her private stock of favorite weapons. She also had photos—of her mother, of Dawn before she got married and moved to Connecticut, of Xander

and Willow looking really, really young. She had a couple of stuffed animals. Shoes were scattered everywhere. And there were also souvenirs, little knickknacks she'd picked up on her travels after the demons were dead. It made sense that her quarters were less spartan than his because she lived there full-time, but he found himself slightly jealous anyway. He didn't really have a place that felt so like home. He'd been telling himself he didn't want one, didn't need one—but maybe he was wrong.

"So," Xander said after a while. "Spike is a teacher."

Buffy sighed, long and loud. "Yeah."

"Why?"

"We found him mooning around this old hotel Angel owns. I guess he had some money, but he was... you know. Angst-ridden."

"And alive," Xander pointed out.

"That too. He's not a guy who likes to be by himself, Xan. Not even when he was a soulless vampire."

"So why hadn't he shown up here already? I bet he could've found you if he tried."

"I don't know." Buffy had her eyes closed, her head lolling against the couch back. "Pride maybe. We had to spend a long time persuading him that we could really use him here."

Xander waited a few moments before he asked his next question. "So are you and Spike... a thing?"

She opened her eyes and turned her head to glare at him, and at the same time Willow poked him hard in the arm.

"Ow!" He tried to move farther away from Willow but couldn't. "I was just wondering."

"Spike and I are not anything," Buffy said firmly.

"But at the end there in Sunnydale, you guys were being kind of cozy, and okay, maybe that was just a little pre-apocalyptic lovin'—been there myself. But now he's a real boy and everything so I thought... you know."

Buffy let her head fall back against the cushions again. "He's still Spike. And it wouldn't work even if I wanted it to—and I don't. I can't let myself love someone who's vulnerable, Xan. I just can't. And how well do you think a nearsighted schoolteacher who used to terrify the masses is going to handle a girlfriend with superpowers?"

Xander thought about that for a while and concluded that she had some pretty good points. Xander himself had long ago stopped stressing over lovers who were infinitely stronger than his puny human self, but then Xander had always been a puny human and his lovers had pretty much always been stronger. "I was just wondering," he repeated, pretty lamely.

Willow toppled slightly sideways to rest her head on his shoulder. "If it bugs you to have him around, you can always come stay at my place. We have an extra bedroom and Lilly won't mind. She likes you."

"Thanks, Will. I think I can handle it. It's a pretty big building." He avoided mentioning that he didn't share Willow's confidence in her partner's esteem. Lilly was always polite to him, but he'd caught the way she watched him, like maybe he was going to revert to his senior year of high school and have another ill-fated fling with Willow.

The three friends chatted for a while after that. He told them a PG-rated version of his Illinois adventures; they gave him the play-by-play of the showdown in Atlanta. Then they had a friendly argument over whether Alexander Skarsgard was enough to make *True Blood* worth watching—Xander and Buffy outvoted Willow on that one—and they helped Xander draw up a rough list of things around HQ that most needed repair.

"I hope you stick around for a while this time," Willow said. "We miss you when you're gone."

"Hey, you know me. Duty calls, I listen." He wasn't sure whether he really wanted to stay for long. No place else was really calling him, but he didn't have any real reason to stick to Reno.

A few minutes later, Willow stood and said she was heading home—Lilly was waiting. Buffy grumbled something about having to pay bills. Xander decided to go for a swim.

~*~*~*~*~

Over the next week, Xander repaired things. Buffy usually ate her dinners in her office off the lobby instead of in the kitchen with everyone else. He supposed she needed a break from the trainees. Sometimes Xander joined Buffy, but sometimes she seemed to want to be alone and he sat with the others. The younger kids spent a lot of time complaining about mean Mr. Pratt. By the sound of it, Spike was crueller as a

schoolteacher than he'd ever been as a vampire.

Xander didn't see him very often. When not in the classroom, Spike seemed to keep to himself. He didn't share meals with the gang, and if he interacted with Buffy at all, Xander never witnessed it.

But in the late afternoons, when everyone else was studying or training, Xander swam. That seemed to be Spike's outdoor leisure time too, because there he'd be in the shade in his suit, nose stuck in a book. Sometimes he had a bottle of beer at his side. He and Xander would greet each other with a nod or a word or two, and then they'd each do their own thing. Except that sometimes when Xander paused to catch his breath or work out a kink in his muscles, he'd catch Spike staring at him. Envious, maybe.

"You know," Xander said at the end of the week, "I could give you some swimming lessons. I promise I'll be gentler about it than Tony was with me."

Spike lifted his bottle and pointed it toward the sky. "Sun."

"We can do it at night, while everyone's out patrolling and stuff."

But Spike's lips thinned and his jaw worked. He put down the beer and picked up the book again, pointedly not looking Xander's way.

"Whatever," Xander said before plunging back beneath the water.

~*~*~*~*~

"God, do you know what Mr. Pratt made me do today?"

Xander couldn't remember this Slayer's name; she was new. She had black-dyed hair and matching black lipstick, and a total of nine piercings in her ears.

Xander swallowed his mouthful of spaghetti and took a healthy swig of milk. "What?"

"I handed in my science homework, right? But he said my handwriting is *appalling* and he made me write the whole thing up on the chalkboard. If I got even a little bit sloppy he erased and made me do it again. God!"

"That's nothing!" piped the Watcher trainee beside her. He was one of those kids that looked like he'd be a lot more comfortable playing Dungeons & Dragons or hacking into the Department of Justice databases. "Yesterday when I wrote T-H-E-R-E instead of T-H-E-I-R he told me if I did it again he'd cane me!"

"He wouldn't dare," goth girl said.

"Oh yes he would. Last month he caned Jose for forgetting that you can only kill Ydeu demons by sprinkling them with cinnamon."

Xander decided then and there that he needed to see the terrible Mr. Pratt in action.

He waited until just after lunchtime the next day

when, according to Xander's sources, the class would be covering history. He could hear Spike lecturing from the hallway again, and Xander eased the classroom door open. Spike turned his head and glared, but didn't pause in his monologue about the *real* reasons the bloody colonists won the Revolutionary War.

Xander smiled innocently and took a seat at the back of the room. He noticed that the students barely acknowledged his presence—they were too busy frantically scribbling notes.

"You!" Spike said, pointing at a girl whose attention had momentarily wandered to the windows. "Explain the impact of disputes involving the Bourbons and Hohenzollerns and their relation to the war in America."

The girl looked terrified. "Um...."

Spike folded his arms across his chest. "Quite an erudite response, miss. Care to expound?"

"Uh... well... the Bourbons were in, like, France.

And Spain! And, um...."

There was a long and uncomfortable pause.

Finally, Spike picked up a little notebook from his desk and made a notation. He looked at the unfortunate student over the rim of his glasses. "You shall write an essay on this topic for me. Ten pages, plus proper citations. Due at the beginning of class on Monday."

The girl groaned and buried her head in her arms.

After that, the others became even more studious and attentive. Xander stretched out his legs and enjoyed the novelty of being in a classroom where he'd never have to take an exam. It was nearly an hour later, when Spike had turned to discussing objective pronouns, that Xander realized he was kind of having fun. He was even—shocking as it was—learning something. Mr. Pratt might have been a tougher teacher than any at Sunnydale High, but he was also *good*. He knew his stuff and he explained it

clearly.

Xander didn't know whether Buffy and Willow had realized Spike would make a good teacher when they offered him the job, or if they simply felt sorry for him. In either case, the former vampire was a huge improvement over Mrs. Dillard, who was a sweet lady who fell for even the lamest of student excuses, and who was often half-toasted after lunchtime.

Xander ended up staying until the end of class. He waited in his chair as the students hurried away and as Spike erased the chalkboard and gathered his papers. "Desperate for entertainment, are we?" Spike finally said.

"I never even heard of the Seven Years' War before." Xander pried himself from his seat and sauntered to the front of the room.

"You lot call it the French and Indian War instead. Bloody typical, ignoring what was going on in the rest of the world."

"Oh. I guess I did hear about that one. Maybe."

Xander perched on the edge of Spike's desk.

"But when Mr. Neilson taught us about it in eleventh grade he was all, 'This battle was in this year and this battle was in that year.' Boring. You had way more juicy details."

Spike gave him an odd look and then shrugged.

"Heard loads about it from Angel. It was his first war, you know. I reckon Darla showed him a lovely time."

Xander pictured vampires gleefully making their way through battlefields. "Ick."

"You lot make such a bloody big deal about vampires, but no demon has ever been as good at exterminating humans as humans are." Spike picked up the last of his papers and walked toward the door.

Xander followed, catching up as they made their way down the hall. "Isn't my lot your lot now too?" he said.

Spike spared him an irritated glance. "What?"

"My lot—humans. The ones who are so good at self-extermination. You're one of us now." He chuckled. "Resistance is futile."

With a sort of growling noise in his throat, Spike picked up speed. But Xander had no trouble keeping up, and even moved slightly ahead. Before they reached the lobby, Spike stopped in his tracks. Xander paused too.

"Didn't *ask* to be human," Spike said. "Didn't bloody want it. I was worth something as a vampire. I was a warrior. Now...." He flapped his elbows. "Now I'm bloody useless. More useless than you, even."

"First off, I'm at least twice as useful as I used to be. Maybe three times. I negotiate peace treaties between species, Spike. I'm fucking good at it. Because of me, there are lots more scaly, furry, slimy people walking around than there might be, and they're not trying to eat each other or humans."

"Right then. You're Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, and Hillary Clinton, all wrapped in one annoying package."

Xander grinned. "Damned right I am. Look, I learned something. Took me a decade or so, but as you like to point out, I'm not so quick on the uptake. It doesn't take fighting to make a hero. Yeah, it's great when folks trot out the sword or the scythe and maybe hold off a zillion monsters from the underworld. But it's just as great when they mediate an agreement that sends those monsters trotting contentedly home without bloodshed. Or when they bully Slayers and Watchers into learning the stuff they need to know to stay alive a little longer."

Spike gave him one of his long, considering looks and then shook his head. "They'd do fine without me."

"I doubt it." Xander surprised them both by grabbing Spike's arm and holding on. "I'm just saying. If I'd had teachers like you back in high

school I sure as hell would have learned a lot more." He let go, turned, and walked away, leaving Spike still standing in the hallway.

Part Five

Spike wasn't at the pool that afternoon, which disappointed Xander although he couldn't have explained why. He swam anyway, back and forth the length of the pool, legs kicking, arms reaching. Between the daily jogs, the daily swims, and the occasional visits to the weight equipment in the training room, he was getting himself into pretty good shape.

But even with the exercise he felt restless that evening. He skipped the communal dinner, opting instead for a sandwich and chips in his room. He flipped through the TV channels for a while but there was nothing on. "Fuck this," he said out loud.

He showered, put on his tightest jeans—not quite as tight as they were a couple weeks earlier—and a sleeveless cobalt T-shirt that

showed off the muscles of his chest and arms. He decided the five o'clock shadow might be interpreted as sexy and so didn't shave, but he did spend a little time fussing with his hair. And then, because he fully intended to get very drunk, he called a cab.

Ace in the Hole was located not far from downtown, just a few blocks from the Silver Legacy. The front of the building housed a slightly decrepit casino, the type of place where the ghost of cigarette smoke still lingered and where few of the patrons sported a full mouthful of teeth. But the casino was only a front, a way for the owners to make a few extra bucks and keep casual sightseers away. Because there was an unmarked black door near the nickel slots, and behind that door was a club that catered to those who weren't especially picky about gender or species.

Xander had come here many times over the years. The interior never changed: a heavy smell of sweat, beer, and sex; pounding music that ranged from nu-disco to dubstep, depending on

the mood of the eight-limbed DJ; a crowd of writhing bodies displaying large amounts of skin—or scales or fur. The décor was minimalist—the place resembled a warehouse more than a club—but then nobody came to Ace in the Hole for decorating ideas. The space was also much bigger than physics permitted. That, plus the fact that the music was never audible in the casino, made Xander suspect that some sort of cross-dimensional thing was going on. The idea of that always bothered him until he had a drink or three.

The bouncer, who bore a close resemblance to Thing from the Fantastic Four, knew Xander and let him in without even asking for the cover charge. Xander wasn't sure if it was his Scooby credentials that got him VIP treatment or the usual demon magnetism, and didn't especially care.

The bar counter was long, crowded, and stainless steel. Xander caught the eye of a shirtless bartender with fluorescent purple skin, and shouted an order for a whiskey with a beer

chaser. As soon as he drank those, he ordered another round. Feeling slightly buzzed, he merged with the dancing masses.

Ace in the Hole was the kind of place where you got groped pretty thoroughly. Fingers, claws, and tentacles slid down Xander's chest, across his ass. Sometimes someone felt up the front of his pants instead and maybe gave a friendly little squeeze. That was fine. Xander was doing a little groping of his own, although mostly he was just moving his body, happily bumping and swaying against whoever was closest to him.

He took a break after a while for more drinks. He was heading back to the dance floor when someone tapped his shoulder. Xander spun around to face a Ruglanthu demon: lithe body, oversized violet eyes with horizontal pupils like a goat's, thick dark hair that was almost fur-like in texture. "Hi," said the Ruglanthu in a surprisingly deep voice. He was several inches shorter than Xander and had especially full lips.

"Hi yourself."

The demon cocked his head in the direction of back of the club, where a series of doors led to rooms with varying levels of privacy. "Want to?"

"Sure."

They wound their way through the throngs. Sometimes Xander lost sight of his new friend, but they both knew where they were heading, and they met up again at a battered gray door near the end of the row. Ace in the Hole wasn't a subtle place: a little green light over the door indicated the room was vacant. The Ruglanthu held the door open as Xander entered.

The little room was no-frills. Just four concrete walls painted some color halfway between beige and gray, a plain concrete floor, and a single lightbulb overhead. It was smaller than Buffy's closet.

As soon as the door was closed and latched, Xander slammed the little demon against it. The Ruglanthu laughed delightedly and shimmied

out of the filmy little shorts that had been his only clothing. "You do this before?" he asked.

Xander grunted an affirmative and moved forward, trapping the demon against his larger body. He had done Ruglanthi before—they were a lot tougher than they looked and they liked it rough. They also had this *thing* they could do with their inner muscles—muscles Xander was pretty sure humans didn't possess—and they could deep throat almost as well as a vampire. Which left two equally attractive possibilities, and Xander was mulling over his options as the demon unbuttoned Xander's jeans and coaxed out his cock.

"Oh," breathed the Ruglanthi. "*Nice.*"

Now, a guy never really got tired of hearing that, did he?

Xander allowed the demon just enough freedom to wiggle around to face the door, and then a very firm demon ass was pressing back against Xander's groin while the Ruglanthi scrabbled his

hands backward, trying to tug Xander even more tightly against him.

"Fuck me. Fuck me hard," ordered the demon.

"Do you need—"

"Hard."

Well, all right then. Xander took his cock in hand, lined himself up, and thrust. It hurt—the Ruglanthi was tight and unlubed—and judging by the way his partner squawked, it hurt the demon even more. But that was a plus as far as this species was concerned, and so Xander began to piston his hips. When he grabbed the Ruglanthi's hair in one hand and rhythmically slammed the guy's face into the door too, the demon wiggled and moaned enthusiastically.

It didn't take them long to climax. The Ruglanthi did that muscle thing, Xander howled and thrust and slammed, and the demon made a noise like an angry tiger.

Xander withdrew from the warm little body and fumbled himself back into his jeans. The Ruglanthi turned around, grinning widely. "Very good. Very, very good."

"I aim to please."

"You want more? Six minutes." The demon held up a hand, which did indeed sport five fingers and a thumb.

Xander considered it. He wasn't twenty anymore, but his refractory period could still be blessedly short. There had been times when he fucked four or five people in a night. But... not tonight. Suddenly, instead of his usual post-orgasmic mellowness, he felt empty. It was like having the munchies, rooting through the fridge, and finding only salad. No matter how much of the stuff you ate—even if the salad was really nice and perky and physically gifted and boy, was this analogy going too far—you'd never be satisfied.

But what was he hungry for?

"Thanks," said Xander. "But I think I'm gonna call it a night. Another time, maybe."

"Sure." The Ruglanthi smiled at him before pulling on his shorts. He gave Xander a little wave before opening the door and exiting the room. By the time Xander crossed the dance floor, the Ruglanthi was already draping himself against something that looked like a spider version of a Hell's Angel.

The night had cooled already. Xander walked for a few blocks, gazing at the colored lights and hearing occasional shouts from drunken revelers. He stopped alongside the Truckee River and leaned against the railing. It was too dark to see the water but he could hear it. He wondered if rafting was fun. He'd never tried it. Really, despite the sort of exotic life he led, there were a lot of things he'd never tried.

Like monogamy.

Well, that wasn't true. There had been Anya.

Except that he was a kid and it was mostly her idea, and when the time came to seal the deal he'd rabbited on her—with disastrous results. And since then he'd never really felt the urge to settle down with that special someone. In fact, although he was willing to believe that some people had special someones, their One True Love, he had been assuming for years that none of that was for him. As the old joke went, he wasn't looking for Mr. Right, just Mr. Right Now.

So why wasn't he back in Ace in the Hole, getting his dick enthusiastically and expertly sucked by a pretty little demon? Or sampling the rest of what the club had to offer, which was varied and willing. Instead he was standing on an empty sidewalk and realizing that the sound of burbling water was making him have to pee.

Part Six

Xander needed a project. Not more repair stuff—that was old hat. He needed something new, something to keep him busy and give him a goal.

He thought about this for several days. Spike rejoined him poolside, and for a while Xander entertained the thought of coaxing him into swim lessons. But Spike was too prickly, too caught up in his books and his lessons. Besides, every time Xander imagined himself in the water with a barely-dressed Spike, maybe even touching Spike's body to guide him into proper position, Xander's stomach did funny things and his brain shied away. Xander felt it was better if he didn't think too much about the reasons behind that.

But at dinner one evening, as Xander ate pizza and listened to the usual litany of Mr. Pratt complaints, a new idea struck him. Also Spike-related, but involving more clothing and less touching. Xander was going to find a way to remove the stick that was up the former vampire's ass.

Figuratively.

At the pool the next day, Xander paused halfway through his swim and hung onto the edge of the wall nearest Spike. "What do you do at night?" Xander asked.

Spike looked up from a book that Xander was pretty sure he wasn't actually reading. "What?"

"At night. You know, sun sets, stars come out, all the little Slayers scamper away. You're not teaching then and you're not sitting here. You never join the gang in the lobby." There was a big-screen TV in what used to be the lobby bar, and a bunch of comfy chairs. Those who weren't patrolling or studying often gathered there in the evenings to eat snacks and gossip and just hang out.

"I prepare my lessons. I mark papers and exams." Spike spoke very slowly, as if to an idiot child.

"Yeah, but *every* night? Don't you take some time off?"

"I don't have time for that rubbish."

"Spike, we're all mortal too. Our lives are ticking away every second, just like yours. But we take the time for relaxing, recreation. Sometimes I just sit and stare at nothing for an hour."

"Doesn't surprise me a bit."

"Yeah, well, it feels good. Nobody can work 24/7. Nobody needs to. Even the Chosen Ones get days off."

Spike narrowed his eyes. "Why is the way I spend my time any concern of yours?"

"It isn't. I just thought... there's this club I go to sometimes. Maybe you—"

"No."

"You don't have to dance. You can just drink

overpriced booze and complain about the music."

Slamming his book, Spike jumped to his feet. "I said no. Don't want your pity."

"Hey, no pity here. I was just hoping for company that's old enough to drink."

"Sod off."

"Fuck you very much," Xander replied, but without any heat. He was tired of squabbling. And besides, Spike had an odd look in his eyes, an awkward hunch to his shoulders, which suggested he was feeling vulnerable about something, although Xander didn't know what. The guy was a puzzle for sure, and Xander had always sucked at puzzles.

Spike stomped off. It had less of an effect with his loafers than it would have with his old Docs, and there was no duster to add a dramatic swirl. Xander missed the duster.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander had a late dinner that night. He stood at a counter in the vast kitchen, eating a hamburger over the sink. He turned when he heard a noise, and was surprised to see Spike entering the room. Spike paused for a moment when he saw Xander, glared slightly, and walked to one of the big fridges. He stood a long time in front of the open door.

"My mom used to yell at me when I did that," Xander said. "But not as much as when I drank milk from the carton."

Spike didn't answer.

"If you're trying to find the answers to life's great questions, they're probably not in there. Or, I don't know. Maybe they are. I never found 'em."

"Can't you leave me in peace while I try to eat?"

"Probably not." Xander swallowed the last of his burger and ambled to Spike's side. "What's the problem? Nothing looks good?"

"Was hoping for leftovers." Spike sounded a little forlorn.

"Yeah, no luck there. They ordered in pizza tonight for some kind of confab—which I skipped, so I missed out on the pepperoni too. But there's plenty of ingredients for you to rustle something up for yourself."

Spike didn't look at him. "Can't cook," he said quietly.

"Why not?"

A half shrug. "Never learnt. Had servants when I was alive, and then...."

"Yeah, vampire diet doesn't take a lot of culinary skills, does it? What did you eat when you were in LA, before you came here?"

"Takeaway." Spike shuddered. "TV dinners."

"Tell you what. I'm gonna fix you one of my special Xanderburger Deluxes, and you're gonna watch, 'cause it really isn't all that hard."

Finally Spike turned his head. "You won't... won't tell the others? They think I'm useless enough as it is."

Xander clapped him on the shoulder. "Mum's the word. Besides, most of them are a disaster around pots and pans too. I know of three Slayers, a Watcher, and a witch who've been permanently banned from using anything but the microwave."

Spike looked grateful, which was new. And then he watched closely as Xander pattered around, chopping onions and mincing garlic, mixing them with the ground beef and spices. "And here's the secret ingredient," Xander announced, taking a slice of cooked bacon from a container in a fridge. He diced it and added it to the rest, which he shaped into a generous-

sized patty. While the meat sizzled in a pan, he toasted a bun, slathered it with mayo and drizzled on ketchup, and added slices of jack cheese and tomato. He didn't usually have an audience in the kitchen, and he decided he kind of liked it. The company was nice.

"It's rather a lot of fuss," Spike said.

"Totally worth it." Xander checked the patty. Satisfied that it was exactly medium-rare, he slid it off the pan and onto the prepared bun. Then he handed the plate to Spike. "Bon appetit."

Spike eyed the food suspiciously, as if he were afraid it might bite back. But then he took a cautious bite and his eyes widened. "Mmm!" he said with his mouth full.

"Told you," Xander said smugly. "It could be my claim to fame, if I wasn't already world-famous Negotiator Guy."

With a roll of his eyes, Spike took the plate to one of the tables that were scattered around

the room. He sat. Xander grabbed two bottles of beer from a special hiding place near the back of the biggest fridge, popped the tops, and brought them over. He set them on the table before sitting opposite Spike.

"Who taught you to do this?" Spike asked, gesturing at his burger.

"I learned to do a few basics when I was a kid, out of self-defense. Jessica and Tony weren't much in the way of cooks and PBJ gets old after a while. But this particular recipe came to me from a vamp I spent a couple nights with, a few years back. He owned a restaurant before he was turned."

"You sleep with vampires?"

Xander grinned wolfishly. "Very little sleep transpired."

Spike took another bite, chewed carefully, and swallowed. "They haven't any souls."

"Yeah, I know. And Angel does but I wouldn't sleep with him on a bet. Look, it's not about the soul, or the heartbeat, or whatever. Not anymore. There's vamps out there who aren't really all that bad as long as they have a regular blood supply. And there are plenty of humans who should probably be staked."

"Odd words to hear from your mouth."

Probably true, Xander thought. "I've grown up. I've seen a lot of things." He smiled. "I am a man of the world."

Spike made a snorting sound and finished his food. Then they sat there, silently drinking their beers. Finally, Xander stood. "You get to wash up. I'm guessing you can figure out how to do that on your own."

Spike didn't even try a snarky retort. He just nodded and watched as Xander left the kitchen.

~*~*~*~*~

An hour later, Xander stood in the middle of his room, dithering. On the one hand, he was bored to tears and pretty lonely. On the other, his last outing—the evening at Ace in the Hole—hadn't been very satisfying. Maybe he should try a different place, a human bar maybe, but he couldn't think of one that wouldn't depress him.

He had just about decided to surf for porn instead when someone knocked on the door.

"It's open," he called, closing his laptop.

The door opened and Spike crept inside. He'd ditched the tie, but still wore a plain white button-down and gray flannel trousers. "Love what you've done with the place," he said, waving a hand at the empty beige walls.

"My decorator's booked. What's up?"

There was a long pause, during which Spike avoided eye contact. Finally, staring fixedly at Xander's TV—which wasn't on—Spike said, "You

mentioned something about going out for a drink."

"You want... oh. You want to go out."

Blue eyes flashed. "Not if it's a big bloody production. I just wanted—"

"No, it's cool. You want to go now?"

"Yes," Spike answered, but didn't sound all that certain.

Suddenly, Xander was wildly enthusiastic about the idea. "Great! Let me just change and then— You're not going to wear that, are you?"

Spike looked down at himself. "Why not?"

"It's not.... What happened to the Billy Idol look?"

"Do you want to go or not?"

"Fine. I want to go." Xander hurried to find his

shoes, deciding that they'd forego Ace in the Hole tonight. Looking as he did, Spike would get eaten alive—and not necessarily in the good way.

They walked in silence down the hallway, then descended by elevator to the lobby and entered the dark parking lot. "My car or yours?" Xander asked. He was willing to play designated driver tonight.

"Don't have one."

"Really? No wheels? How come?" Xander led the way to his battered Explorer, which had seen better days but was big enough to haul stuff. He'd even slept in it a few times, in a pinch. Not the Ritz, but tolerable. It blipped as he unlocked it.

Spike didn't answer until they were both inside. "Left mine in LA, and don't really need one here. I don't... don't get out often. I borrow one when I have to."

"Oh. Well, you're welcome to mine anytime. Just try to bring it back in one piece." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Spike give him a curious stare.

Xander ended up driving them to a bar downtown, near the river. He'd been there once or twice before. It was a casual place, quiet but not stuffy. There were a couple dozen other customers there, most of them in their thirties and forties, sitting in small groups and chatting. Spike's outfit blended right in. Xander found them a table near a window, and when a smiling woman appeared a few moments later, both men ordered beer. Xander intended to nurse his.

Spike looked like he was trying very hard to relax, but not quite succeeding. His glance darted around the room and his foot jiggled under the table. His hands were clenched into fists.

"It's a friendly place," Xander said quietly.
"Nothing lethal. Actually, the whole town's

pretty safe, on account of HQ being here. It's mostly the peaceful sort of demons who come here. It's like... I don't know... paranormal Switzerland."

The waitress arrived and Spike didn't say anything. He sipped at his beer and so did Xander, and although they weren't having sparkling conversation or anything, for some reason sitting in silence with Spike was infinitely better than sitting alone.

"M not him," Spike eventually said, very softly.

"Not who?"

"The bloke—the *vampire* who wore the boots and the black jeans and the black nail polish and the duster."

"You still have the Day-Glo hair," Xander pointed out.

Spike ran his palm over his head. "Habit. And the roots looked bloody awful."

"Guess you're enjoying having a reflection again."

That earned him a small smile, possibly the first he'd seen on Spike's face since arriving in Reno. But then Spike shook his head slightly. "'M not *him* any longer. But I'm not that sod William Pratt either. He could never abide the memories I have." He drummed a fingertip on his skull.

Xander's heart broke, just a little, out of empathy for Spike. Which was a really strange thing. But he suddenly found himself wondering what it would be like to exist for a century and half, then lose your superpowers but keep all the recollections of death and mayhem. And to have lost everyone who'd ever mattered to you too, with little hope of finding new friends or lovers who could accept your unique history.

"So maybe you could be someone new?" Xander suggested gently. "Reinvent yourself."

"I did."

Xander winced. "Yeah, into Mean Mr. Pratt." He leaned forward across the table. "You're a really good teacher, Spike. But you need to loosen up a little. Have a little fun."

"I am," Spike insisted, then nodded his head to indicate the bar in general.

"Yeah, you're just a barrel of laughs." Xander leaned back in his seat and toyed for a moment with the strap of his eye patch. It annoyed him sometimes. "Look, I'm glad you're here. It's a good start."

Spike cocked his head. "You are? Glad, I mean."

The answer was honest. "I really am. Wouldn't have invited you otherwise."

Spike nodded a little in return, then drank more beer. They sat there for a long time, talking easily about nothing important. Xander shared a few of his adventures from the past few years, and Spike told him about life in Victorian

London. They avoided difficult subjects—Buffy, Angel, apocalypses, and so on—but that was okay. It was pleasant just to chat. They even gossiped a little over the trainees, and Spike managed actual laughter when Xander passed on some of his students' favorite complaints.

By the end of his third beer, Spike's tense muscles had finally eased a bit, the tightness around his jaw finally loosening. He'd stopped looking nervously around and actually looked like he was having fun. Nothing rip-roaring—just a couple of friends enjoying time together. Friends. Holy hell. When did that happen?

Xander drove them back to HQ, making an intentional detour past the casinos to look at the lights. "Biggest little city," Spike said with a snort as they drove down Virginia Street and passed under the famous arch.

"Hey, it beats a hellmouth any day."

"Does at that."

They rolled the windows down and breathed in the cool night air. The summer was almost over. Maybe this winter Xander would learn to ski. An image of Spike snowboarding flashed through his mind and he chuckled to himself.

There was a kind of awkward pause when they parked at HQ and walked into the lobby—like that moment on a first date when neither person is sure what to do next. Not that this had been a date, Xander reminded himself sternly. He realized he didn't even know where in the building Spike lived.

"I've class in the morning," Spike said.

"Yeah. And I have to take a look at the one of the AC units. It's been making funky noises the last few days."

"Right." Spike turned and headed away from the elevators, in the direction of the hall that led to the classroom.

"Spike? Thanks for going with me tonight."

Spike stopped and turned, and for a brief moment his face shone with a smile so dazzling it stopped Xander's breath. "Thanks for inviting me, Xander," Spike replied. Then he spun around and went on his way.

Part Seven

The students still whined about Mr. Pratt. But when Xander showed up each day for his afternoon swim, Spike gave up the pretense of reading his book and instead chatted with Xander between laps. One day he even took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his trouser cuffs, and spent ten minutes dangling his feet in the water. It still seemed strange to see him in the sunshine, and Xander had to work very hard not to notice that Spike had sexy feet.

Over three weeks, Xander taught Spike how to stir fry, make pasta, and bake a chicken. Xander

even went out and bought a gas grill so that Spike could learn the manly art of barbecuing. That didn't go as well as Xander had hoped, but at least Spike was no longer as flammable as he once had been.

They went out again five times: three times to the same bar as before, once to Outback Steakhouse for dinner, and once to see a spy movie. That was really strange—sitting in the dark next to Spike and sharing a tub of popcorn—but Xander enjoyed himself and he thought Spike did as well.

Those outings were not dates. The two men hadn't touched each other, aside from an occasional hand on a shoulder or macho pat on the back. And if Xander had given up on internet porn entirely in favor of jacking off while imagining all the things he'd like to do with Spike, well, that was nobody's business but his own. Spike certainly never gave any indication that his fantasies were heading in the same direction.

One night, though, they stayed in and ate dinner in the kitchen together, then headed for a smallish room that was set up with arcade games and a foosball table. Apparently someone had convinced Buffy that the games improved manual dexterity and, therefore, were worthy of adding to the budget. Usually the room got a lot of use in the evenings, but Spike's students had a big chemistry test the next day, and everyone else was away in Sacramento for a few days, dealing with some kind of demon activity. Xander hadn't bothered to get the details.

The men had the place to themselves. Xander brought down some six-packs of Heineken and they both proceeded to get pretty wasted. Spike beat Xander five games out of eight at foosball, but Xander totally kicked his ass at Ms. Pacman and Border Break.

When they were down to the final bottles of beer, they collapsed into a pair of armchairs and had a spirited argument about whether *Firefly* belonged on the list of the top five TV shows ever.

"You just want to shag that captain bloke," Spike said, waving his bottle for emphasis. He'd unfastened the top several buttons of his shirt, revealing a white undershirt and a few inches of pale skin.

"Yeah, I'd totally do him. I wouldn't turn down Zoe either. Or Kaylee or Simon, or—"

"Slut."

Xander grinned. "Opportunist."

"Opportunity does not appear to be knocking for you nowadays."

Xander hoped his blush wasn't too obvious.

"Yeah, I, uh, I'm taking a break."

"I haven't shagged anyone since I Shanshued," Spike said, slurring slightly.

Xander figured that Shanshuing had something to do with Spike becoming human—a topic they

had avoided so far. "You and Buffy aren't—"

"No." Spike sighed. "Still love her. I expect I always will. Hell, I still love Dru as well. Can't help it. But I'm not meant to have either of them any longer."

"Are you okay with that?"

Spike seemed to consider this for a while. "Yes, I expect I am. I'm not the creature who fell for them. Lord knows their hearts moved on long ago—not that I truly owned either of them, not really—and it's long past time for mine to do the same."

Xander's own heart should not have raced at the news that Spike had given up his torch for Buffy, and he should not have felt a thrill of delight run down his spine. The alcohol was to blame.

"Plenty o' fish in the sea," he said, trying to sound sincere.

Spike nodded and sucked on his teeth thoughtfully. Then he put his empty bottle down

on the floor. It toppled and rolled a short way. "Fish," he said slowly, drawing the vowel out. "You do fancy a paddle, don't you?"

At first, Xander pictured a wooden paddle, of the sort used in BDSM games and which he might sort of, kind of, have developed a little fondness for during his time with Anya. His blush intensified. But then he realized that Spike was talking about *swimming*, and the possible meaning of the words sank in at about the same time Xander noticed the gleam in Spike's eyes. And then Xander's mouth simply fell open as his brain searched frantically for the right thing to say.

He never found that right thing.

The hallway echoed with fast footsteps and loud voices, and a small crowd burst into the room, led by Buffy.

"*There* you are, Xander! I've been looking all over for you and you haven't answered your phone, and— Oh. Hi, Spike."

Spike slumped in his seat but gave her a little wave.

She turned back to Xander and started to speak again, but she caught sight of the bottles scattered around the floor. "You're drunk!" she accused.

"Blissfully."

Some of the Slayers behind her snickered, but she turned and glared and they shut right up. "We have to talk, Xander."

"'Bout what? 'Cause me and Spike, we were just talking about fish, and that's pretty damned important."

Spike looked startled for a moment and then flashed one of those blinding, knee-melting smiles. "Yeah, Slayer. Your topic had better be more important than fish."

There were more muffled giggles, which she

chose to ignore. Instead, she looked up at the ceiling, as if she might be imploring God. Or the light fixture. "I am so not in the mood for this. Fine." She pointed a pink-polished fingernail at Xander. "Go sleep it off. I'll meet with you first thing in the morning. *First* thing, Xander."

"Yes, master. Mistress. Sir." Xander gave her his most charming grin, which only made her frown deepen. He considered warning her that she was going to end up with wrinkles if she kept that up, but luckily he wasn't quite toasted enough to make that mistake.

"First thing," she repeated, then whirled around and marched back out the door. Her minions followed.

"What was *that*?" Spike asked.

"Probably the world's ending again. Either that or her toilet's backed up." Xander groaned and rose to his feet. He was only a little unsteady. "I guess I should turn in."

Spike gave an unhappy little nod. "Right."

Instead of heading for the exit, Xander detoured to Spike's chair. Grabbing the arms to steady himself, he bent down, really close to Spike's surprised face. "I really hope we can resume our conversation soon," Xander whispered. "I wanna know your thoughts about fish." Deciding that was as much innuendo as he could manage in his current state, he leaned forward just enough to press his lips against Spike's for a quick kiss. Then he stood and swam away before Spike could respond.

Part Eight

"If you're gonna lecture me, can you at least lower the volume?" John Philip Sousa was conducting band practice in Xander's skull, making him want to moan piteously.

But Buffy did not lower the volume. "If you think

I'm going to feel sorry for you after you chose to get drunk, then—"

"Save me the Just Say No speech. Please. I'm a grown man, I wasn't driving or operating heavy machinery, and I have the God-given right to get a little shit-faced every now and then. It's in the Constitution. Besides, it's not like I knew you were going to have a Xander-related emergency."

Willow patted him soothingly on the knee. "It's not really an emergency, exactly. It's, it's more like a predicament. Something important that we have to deal with right away."

"Marvy." He leaned his head back against Buffy's couch cushions and closed his eyes. "Lay it on me."

They did. It was nothing out of the ordinary, really: two warring demon clans, which usually nobody else would give a shit about. But these particular demons were allies with the Council, and they were helping to keep the peace in

southern California, allowing the Council to stretch its thin ranks a little farther. The previous day, the two clans had almost erupted in open warfare. They'd agreed to suspend the hostilities in favor of an external mediator, but Buffy was pretty certain they wouldn't be patient for long.

"So that's why you're flying to LA tonight," she concluded.

"Fine. How long do you think this will take?"

Buffy turned to Willow, who shrugged.

"Jastmeros are pretty big on procedure and ceremony."

"Great. Am I gonna have to lead any of these ceremonies?" Because he'd done so in the past now and then, or donned the traditional clothing that various demons demanded. Latex, feather boas, and horsehair made for an uncomfortable and humiliating ensemble. And then there was the time he ended up with glitter in unmentionable places.

But Willow shook her head. "I don't think so. You just have to stay awake and look like you're paying attention."

"Not exactly my forte, Will."

"Drink a lot of lattes."

He sighed. "Goody. Endless days in La-La Land and I'm gonna have to pee every ten minutes. Anything else I need to know?"

It was Buffy who answered. "You're going to need an interpreter. The Jousty guys speak English okay, but not perfectly, and neither side trusts the other's interpreters. None of our Watchers speak the lingo, but Giles says he can manage it. He'll get a flight out tomorrow morning."

Even better. Endless meetings with Giles. Not that Xander would mind catching up a little, but Giles had this way of making Xander feel like he was fifteen again—and, unfortunately, making

him act that way too. That was even less pretty than the glitter.

But then Xander had an inspiration: maybe he could find someone else to translate. Someone who was also knowledgeable about demons but—at least lately—a lot more fun to hang out with than Giles. Not to mention pretty easy on the eyes.

"Tell G-Man not to pack yet. I have an idea."

Willow and Buffy exchanged looks, and Buffy asked, "What?"

"It's— Give me an hour, okay?"

"Whatever. But tonight your butt's on that plane."

"And I suppose the rest of me's gotta tag along."

His head was still pounding as he made his way to the lobby. His heart was pounding too, but that was out of anxiety over what he was about

to do. He paused in front of a pair of girls who were sitting in the lobby, yawning dramatically over their textbooks. "Morning, ladies."

They scowled at him and the one in the green pajamas tucked her hair behind her ear.

"*Morning* is when you get to be in bed, all sleepy and comfy like. This ain't morning."

Her companion nodded in agreement. "This is a special time, like they have in other dimensions. One minute stretches for hours. It's Mr. Pratt Time."

"Speaking of the torturer-in-chief, do you know where his room his?"

"He don't have no room," said the first girl. "He don't sleep like a normal person. He stays up all night at his desk, thinkin' of new ways to make us miserable."

"Well, if he did catch forty evil winks, where would that be?"

"Room 262."

"Thanks. Have fun, ladies."

They stuck out their tongues in unison as he walked away, and somehow that pleased him. He was now officially The Man.

Room 262 was down an odd hallway, part of what Xander figured must have been an afterthought annex to the building. As far as he knew, nobody else had rooms in this particular area because it was really far from the kitchen and the social spots, and because the heating was inconsistent in winter. He wondered whether Spike had chosen the solitude on purpose.

He knocked on the door to 262 but got no response. When a harder series of knocks still got him nowhere, he fished in his pocket for his master key—one of the perks of being the maintenance staff. The key worked easily and he swung the door open.

He hadn't really known what to expect. He'd seen Spike's old home in the crypt, and it had actually been a pretty decent place—for a crypt. It had more ambience than the basement where Xander had lived. So he knew that Spike wasn't a slob, at least when he was compos mentis.

What he found was a room that looked remarkably like his own, bland and fairly bare and devoid of personal touches. The only differences between his suite and Spike's room were that Spike had an old desk, plus stacks and stacks of books. And in the middle of the unmade bed—red comforter, not blue—was a Spike-shaped lump.

"Hey! Sleepyhead! Up and at 'em." Xander immediately wished he hadn't been so loud, because fresh stabs of pain lanced through his head. And the only response he got was a very muffled sort of groan, as if something were dying. So he made his way across the room and sat on the bed hard enough to shake the mattress.

The lump moaned again and wrapped itself more tightly in the blankets.

"C'mon, Spike. I really have to ask you something."

The lump made a noise that sounded like *aspirin*.

"Hah!" Xander pulled the little plastic bottle from his jeans pocket. He'd already taken a couple, but had brought more to the meeting with Buffy and Willow, just in case.

The sound of the rattling pills was finally enough to get Spike to unwind himself a little. His head stuck out of the blanket, and Xander had to suppress a grin over the wild curls and sort of adorably squinty eyes. Xander opened the bottle, poured out a couple of aspirin, and held them on his open palm. A pale and shaky hand appeared and snatched them away.

"Want some water?" Xander asked. He was pretty sure the grunt that followed was

affirmative, so he went into the bathroom—smaller than his and very neat—and found a plastic cup next to the sink, filling it at the tap.

When Xander returned to the main room, Spike had managed to sit up. The blankets had fallen away from his upper body, revealing a lot of bare skin. Xander caught himself wondering if Spike's bottom half was equally naked. He quickly handed over the cup.

Spike grumbled and moaned and took the aspirin, and Xander sat down in one of the room's two chairs. When the cup was empty, Spike set it on the nightstand. "Vampires don't have hangovers," he said.

"Good for them."

Spike ran his fingers through his already unruly hair, which didn't help a bit, and then rubbed his face. "Wha'?" he demanded.

"Well, see, I was talking to Buffy and Willow, and—"

"Hang on." With some difficulty, Spike extricated himself from the bedding and levered himself to his feet. Turned out he was indeed fully clothing-free, and also sporting impressive morning wood. Xander tried not to look and failed, but Spike was too bleary-eyed to notice. Xander enjoyed the view very much as Spike slowly stumbled his way to the bathroom. The door closed, water splashed in the sink for a few moments, and there was the noise of someone taking a very long piss. Then water ran again and Spike came back out, dick all soft and pretty and eyes a smidgen sharper. "I bloody hate having to use the loo again."

"Yeah, but I bet bathrooms have improved since your day. The Japanese have these fancy toilets with heated seats and adjustable squirts of water. Some of them even talk to you."

Spike gave him an unbelieving look. "I do *not* want my toilet talking to me."

"Me either, actually. I mean, what could a toilet

say that a guy could possibly want to hear?"

With a shake of his head, Spike sat down on the bed again and, unfortunately, pulled the blankets over his lap. "Discussing plumbing wasn't your big emergency, was it?"

"Not exactly. You don't speak Jastmero by any chance, do you?"

It took Spike a moment to process that question, which had admittedly come out of left field.

"Can manage it passably."

"Excellent!" Xander wiped his palms together like a mad scientist. "Then I need you to fly with me to LA."

"What?"

Xander explained as succinctly as possible, and as he spoke Spike's face was stony. When Xander finally ran out of words, Spike just shook his head. "No."

"No? Why not?"

"I have my lessons to teach—"

"Give the kids a break. A vacation. They did have those even back in olden days, didn't they? Your students will come back refreshed and relaxed and twice as eager to have you stuff knowledge down their throats."

"Schoolteachers don't go on... on missions. That's for Slayers and a Watcher or two. The ones who can fight."

"Except the whole point of this mission is to avoid fighting, remember? I'm going and you know what I was like as a fighter, even back when I didn't have a huge blind side. What's needed here is someone who can negotiate and someone who can translate, and that's us."

"I'm certain there are others who speak Jastmero."

"Probably. But I don't want others. I want you."

He regretted the phrase as soon as he said it, because although he meant it most sincerely—and in more than one way—he wasn't at all sure how Spike would take it. Possibly he'd be offended or put off.

Instead, Spike looked surprised and fairly pleased. "That bollocks last night about fish...."

Xander winced. "Yeah, you remember that too, do you?" He took a deep breath and then let it out. He decided to pretend he was confident and secure. "Look, you know I'm attracted to guys, and also attracted to those of the demon or formerly demon persuasion. And you... you're pretty damned attractive to anyone who's got an eye in his head, which I know *you* know perfectly well. And I've been having a lot of fun hanging out with you, and I don't have a whole lot of friends, so that's been cool. I wouldn't mind... wouldn't mind seeing if we could be, um, friends plus. But if we're just gonna be buddies, that's okay too. I can live with that, and I promise I won't molest you."

Spike listened carefully to the little speech, head cocked slightly to the side. When Xander stopped talking, Spike was silent, chewing on his lower lip.

"I've never.... Vamps have a reputation, yeah? Not caring what we—what *they* fuck. I expect it's true for some of them. But me... there was Dru, and then Harmony, and then Buffy, and that was it. Ever. Erm, except that one time...."

Xander raised his eyebrows. "That one time?"

"I... we were rat-arsed. The girls had run off with the bloody Immortal and they'd been gone for ages, and we'd consoled ourselves with gallons of sacramental wine—his idea, not mine—and we were feeling a bit... experimental like."

"He? We?" Xander asked, although he had a pretty good idea where this was going.

Spike sighed. "'Gelus."

At first Xander thought he'd said "jealous," and

yeah, he kind of was, even though this event had happened nearly a century before he was born. But then he realized what Spike was actually saying and made a face. "Ew."

"Oi! He's not bad-looking, once you get past the stupid hair and the caveman forehead. And he wasn't a moping twat back then, not yet."

"But he was still Angel."

Another sigh. Then, as if embarrassed, he said quietly, "Yeah. It... wasn't very good. The shagging, I mean. Never tried it again."

"Okay. But have you wanted to? I mean, I know you're pretty much the emperor of monogamy, but have you ever been tempted by a guy? Have you ever... I don't know... fantasized?"

Spike blushed and looked down. "Yeah."

Xander was suddenly so hard it hurt. To see Spike sitting like that, naked except for the covers, looking like a shy virgin—it was almost

more than Xander could take. And then a thought occurred to him. "Um, you mentioned Drusilla and Harmony and Buff. What about before? When you were alive the first time?"

Spike looked up, but only briefly. "Died a virgin. Victorian, yeah?"

"Wow. So... you've never had sex as a human. And the one time you slept with a guy you were drunk and inexperienced and it was Angel, who I'm placing bets is not the world's most considerate lover. No wonder you're a little... hesitant."

When Spike still didn't look up, Xander stood, crossed the room, and sat down next to him on the bed, being careful not to disturb the blankets. "It took me a while to accept that I like men—and demons. I felt a lot better once I did. But you need time to think, and I'm not gonna try to pressure you into anything. I told you already, if you want to keep it strictly platonic, I can do that. But either way, I wish you'd come with me to LA. I could use your help."

Spike finally looked at him. "Yeah. All right."

Part Nine

The younger Slayers and Watchers looked entirely delighted when Spike appeared in the lobby with a duffel bag over his shoulder. Xander was certain that a celebratory party would occur the minute he and Spike pulled out of the parking lot. But Mr. Pratt still frowned sternly at his audience and instructed them to read *King Lear* and *Death of a Salesman*, and to write a paper comparing and contrasting them. "And don't forget chapters eight and nine in your trigonometry text," he added.

The students were still too happy to complain.

Spike didn't say much on the way to the airport, but he seemed very tense. Xander didn't know if he was worried over the travel, the mission, or the proximity to a potentially lust-crazed man. Maybe all three.

But they got parked and got through security all right, and then sat and watched people play the slots as they waited for their flight. Xander sipped a coffee but Spike just fidgeted.

Once they were in the air, Xander yawned and moved his seat back. "It's a short flight but I'm gonna try for a nap."

"Where are we staying?"

"I don't know. Maybe near the airport or something, at least for tonight. Why, you have a suggestion?"

"I own a hotel."

Xander blinked at him. "You what?"

"Was Angel's. Gave it to me when he scarpered. Enormous old heap, mostly empty. But I've a bit of dosh as well and a caretaker lives there, makes sure it's still standing. We can stay there if you like. I've a car there as well."

"That sounds great, Spike. Buffy'll be thrilled we're working low-budget."

Spike looked satisfied and pulled out a book. Xander pretended to sleep, but in actuality he wondered why Spike would go to the expense and effort of keeping the hotel. Maybe he was afraid he'd get tired of HQ or wear out his welcome.

They caught a cab at LAX; it was late enough that traffic was light, and the ride didn't take very long. Spike's hotel was an old one, much more attractive than HQ but looking as forlorn as a stray dog. Spike led them right to the front door and knocked hard. Several moments later, the door creaked open like something from a horror movie.

"Spike!" greeted the demon inside, and Xander gaped in surprise.

"Clem?"

The demon smiled at him. "Hey. I remember

you! You were the Slayer's friend, right? Hey, come on in, guys. You caught me just as I was heading to bed."

The lobby was very empty, the sound of their footsteps loud on the patterned floor. But things looked to be in reasonably good order, and it smelled of lemony wood polish.

"Looks as if you've been taking good care of it," Spike said.

Clem beamed. "Thanks! I have been. It's a lot of work, but I'm glad to do it. And I'm happy to see you're back to appreciate it. Are you here for good?"

Spike shook his head. "Just for a bit. We've some business to attend to. Is my car running?"

"Yep. Just got the oil changed the other day."

Clem pulled at one of his ears. "I don't have your room made up or anything. If you want me to—
"

"Nah. Can do it myself." Spike jerked his head at Xander. "He'll have the one next door."

Xander was slightly disappointed to learn they weren't going to share a room, but pleased that Spike was at least keeping him nearby.

They exchanged a few more words and then Clem wandered off, wishing them a good night as he disappeared through a door off the lobby. Spike led Xander up a grand stairway and down a short hallway, then opened the room marked 211. Xander was surprised to see that although the room was even more barren than his suite at HQ, it had obviously been updated sometime in recent decades. The TV wasn't a flatscreen but wasn't a dinosaur either, and the walls were papered in a pleasant blue-on-blue pattern. The carpet looked almost new, as did the furniture and the bare mattress. There was even a picture on the wall, a framed charcoal sketch of some old city.

"I've extra bedding and towels in my room. I'll bring them over. There's likely nothing either of

us want to eat in the place. Clem's diet wouldn't suit."

"I'm not hungry," Xander said. He'd had a burger and fries at the airport.

"Right then. We've an early engagement with the demons, so...."

"Yeah. Bedtime. Neither of us got much sleep last night."

Spike managed a small smile. "At least my head's shrunk to its usual size."

While Spike went to fetch the linens, Xander texted Willow to tell her they'd arrived and settled in. Spike arrived a moment later with his arms full, then dumped everything on the bed. "Night, Xander," he said.

Xander ignored the stupid little thrill he got when Spike said his name. "Sweet dreams."

Spike snorted at him before heading to room

209.

It took Xander a little while to make the bed and wash up, and by then he really was exhausted. He didn't even bother turning on the TV. He just slipped between the crisp sheets—which smelled a little like lavender—then turned off the bedside lamp, and within minutes he was lost to the world.

~*~*~*~*~

The Jastmeros had insisted on an early start to things. Xander grumbled when his alarm went off, grumbled more when he discovered that the water pressure in the shower was crappy, and then groaned when he realized there was probably no coffee in the place. But he managed to make himself presentable in what he'd been assured was appropriate Jastmero-mediating attire: dressy slacks, a nice shirt, and a boring navy tie. He tamed his hair and straightened his eyepatch, and emerged from room 211 just in time to bump into Spike.

Xander grinned at what he saw. "Now, that's more like it."

Spike had lost the tweed. He wore tight black jeans and a bright blue sweater that Xander yearned to reach out and touch. Instead of his teacherly loafers, he had on a pair of shiny black shoes with slightly pointed toes. Xander was no expert in these things, but the entire outfit looked pricy.

Spike looked down at himself doubtfully. "'M not sure if—"

"I'm sure. You look delicious but professional, which I think is damned hard to pull off."

The corners of Spike's mouth twitched.
"Delicious?"

"I get to say those things to men now that I'm officially riding the rainbow."

Clem was nowhere in sight as they made their way through the hotel, but a set of keys had

been left conspicuously on the former registration desk. Spike grabbed them without comment.

Xander had forgotten the odd yellowish blue of a Los Angeles morning sky. He inhaled deeply, smelling jacaranda blooms and exhaust. Spike must have noticed, because he asked, "Do you miss it?"

"What? LA? I never lived here."

"Close enough."

Xander followed him down the walkway and



then along the sidewalk.

They turned the corner onto a side street, where Xander saw a black Acura sedan parked on a circular driveway. "You drive an *Acura*?" he blurted.

Spike shot him a quick glare. "'S practical. Dependable."

"Oh my God. This is worse than the tweed."

If Spike had still been an evil demon, he probably would have murdered Xander. As it was, he had to satisfy himself with a death glare that didn't cow Xander at all. They climbed inside—Spike at the wheel—and pulled away.

"Breakfast first?" Xander asked. He got a growl in response, but a few minutes later they were pulling into a Starbucks drive-through. Spike ordered tea with milk and sugar and a slice of lemon loaf; Xander had a venti Americano black and some sort of ham and spinach breakfast wrap that kept trying to fall apart into his lap.

"Do *you* miss it?" asked Xander as they pulled onto the freeway.

"Not really. I've some... bad memories here."

"The thing with the lawyers."

Spike nodded once. "Lost some good people. Thought I was dust as well. But then I woke up and the bad guys were gone, and I had a pulse."

"So you lost part of yourself too."

Spike gave him such a long look Xander was afraid the car was going to crash. "Yeah. The demon... he was *me* for so long." He twitched his shoulders. "I expect it's a bit like when you lost your eye."

"I still miss it after all these years. I adjusted. I get along fine without it. But when I dream, I always have two of 'em." Xander patted Spike's leg once and then took his hand away.

"Wouldn't have any if you hadn't been quick on the draw."

He got a dismissive noise in response, but Spike couldn't hide a small, pleased smile. It occurred to Xander that Spike probably rarely received praise or gratitude.

For reasons known only to themselves, the Jastmeros had set up the meeting in a bowling alley in Monrovia. The place wasn't open for business, but a very round woman with a unibrow and oddly orange skin let them in. Xander took a closer look and realized it wasn't a bad spray-tan—she also possessed a long, slender, hairless tail, which protruded from a small hole in the rear of her mom-jeans. The tail was whipping back and forth, and he didn't know whether that was a good thing.

She must have realized who they were, because she locked the door behind them and, without saying anything, took them to the snack bar. It smelled like ancient nachos and sour cheap beer. The tables had been rearranged so that there were two long rows on either side, each flanked with a half dozen Oompa-Loompa-ish demons. A smaller table had been set crosswise at one end, two chairs behind it. Xander waited for his guide to take a seat, and then he and Spike stood behind the small table.

"Hello," Xander said to the assemblage. "I'm

Xander, a representative of the Watchers' Council. This is Spike, who will be translating." He'd already been informed that, like Cher and Madonna, these demons went by a single name.

One of the Jastmeros on Xander's right stood. He wore a brown leisure suit and the tip of his tail was wrapped around one beefy forearm. "We have heard of you, Xander of the Council, and we have heard that you are an honorable creature. Do you trust this person you have brought?"

Spike tensed a little, but Xander nodded easily. "I'd trust him with my life. Actually, I *have* trusted him with my life."

"Very well," said the demon, while Spike tried—unsuccessfully—not to beam with pleasure. The demon continued. "We welcome you, Xander of the Council and Spike the Interpreter."

Xander made an awkward little bow, which Spike copied, much more gracefully. Then everyone sat.

The ceremonies began. Xander couldn't really follow them, but he'd been told he didn't need to. Basically, the demons took turns standing and giving little speeches in their own language, which sounded like Swedish through a blender. As they spoke, they moved their tails in complicated patterns and used a set of painted rocks to do something that looked like a cross between juggling and three-card monte. Periodically, one of them would dart behind the snack bar—they moved surprisingly fast—and come back with a tray full of some kind of food item, which was distributed and gobbled. It smelled like cat food and Xander was grateful that he wasn't expected to partake.

At long last, the opening formalities were complete. Everyone took a break, during which Spike and Xander escaped to the men's room. "Did you mean it?" Spike asked as they were washing up.

Xander wondered if Spike had been mulling over that question for the past three hours. "Yep," he

answered.

Spike didn't answer, but when he walked back to their table, a good deal of his old cocky spring had returned to his step.

As soon as Spike and Xander were seated, the demon who'd let them in stood. She spoke for a few minutes and then looked at Spike expectantly before retaking her chair.

Spike turned to Xander. "Do you want a direct translation—a bit difficult, really—or more of a paraphrase?"

Xander looked at the Jastmeros, then stood, because apparently you were supposed to before addressing everyone. "Is it okay with you if Spike rephrases a little? It might make things go more smoothly. You all speak English well enough to correct him if he gets the meaning wrong."

The Jastmeros mumbled amongst themselves for a few minutes, then turned back to Xander.

Mom-jeans stood. "Your suggestion is acceptable."

"Excellent. And hey, I'm really glad we're able to start things in the spirit of cooperation. That tends to make things better for everyone. I'm sure we're going to be able to work together for a result that satisfies everyone." He took his seat again, noting that the demons looked pleased over the praise. He'd learned long ago that it never hurt to begin with a little positive reinforcement.

"Right then," Spike said. "It's like this. This lot has an annual competition. Used to be a duel to the death, but they've recently replaced that with something a bit more... modern. It's—well, I didn't get all the details, but I think it's a bit like fantasy football, yeah? Only instead of pretending to manage football teams, they each follow human celebrities. They get points when various things happen to their players—births, film contracts, arrests, that sort of thing."

"Okay. I get that. Sounds pretty entertaining,

actually."

The Jastmeros smiled at him, happy that he approved. Then one of the females on the other side stood, and she talked for a while. Whatever she was saying made her opponents angry, and mom-jeans and the guy next to her began to grumble.

"Hey," Xander said, rising to his feet. "Ground rules. We can take all the time in the world and I will listen to everything anyone has to say. But no interrupting. When someone else is talking, if you disagree with what they're saying you can take notes and then have your say when it's your turn. But let's give everyone equal respect, please." He sat down again, content that the rudeness would abate. He'd handled way rowdier crowds than this one.

"Thank you," said the female who'd been interrupted. Then she spoke for another minute or two.

Spike had been listening intently. "She says that

this competition is really important. Clans with more points have more status. Every six years there's a sort of championship round, and the winning clan gets to lead the whole lot until the next championship."

"Makes as much sense as presidential elections," Xander observed. "Possibly more. All right then, I think I understand the basics. What's the dispute about?"

A lot more discussion followed. It was interrupted by lunch (Spike and Xander were served grilled cheese, fries, and Cokes, courtesy of the snack bar) and another bathroom break, as well as several ceremonies involving chanting, tail-waving, and colored rocks. By the end of the day, Xander had learned that these two clans were in first and second places, but they were arguing over some of the scoring rules. Also, each side was accusing the other of influencing the contest by getting in touch with the actual celebrities and trying to affect their decisions. One demon had even managed to get a Kardashian to marry him; the marriage lasted

almost three weeks.

It was dark when they left the bowling alley and Spike looked as exhausted as Xander felt. But Xander had promised the Jastmeros they'd be back first thing in the morning.

"Dinner?" Xander asked as they pulled out of the parking lot.

"Yeah. Preferences?"

"I'd go for anything edible that doesn't taste like bowling alley."

Spike parked in front of a Thai restaurant just a few blocks away. The waiter took their order—chicken satay, Massaman curry, beef pad kra prao, spicy noodles with vegetables. Xander ordered Thai iced tea but Spike asked for the hot kind with, of course, milk and sugar.

"That was horrible," Spike said as they waited for the food. "How can you abide listening to them natter on and on like that?"

"Usually the negotiations go a lot better if you let them talk a lot first. Everyone feels like they've had their say, you know? They feel like the process is fairer."

"Yeah, but you have to listen to them."

"It's my job. I've had a lot of jobs. Some of them were really crappy—"

"I remember."

"—and some weren't so bad. But this one is important. Maybe as important as the stuff Buffy and Willow and the others do."

Spike didn't nod, but he did look very thoughtful. "Doesn't take fighting to make a hero," he said, quoting Xander.

Xander grinned.

~*~*~*~*~

That night, they watched TV for a while in Spike's room—which was pretty much identical to Xander's although the sketch was clearly of London, including Big Ben and several horse-drawn carriages. But both men were pretty worn out and soon Xander retired to his room. He texted a quick update to Reno and then fell asleep.

For twelve hours the next day, Spike and Xander listened to the demons and watched the rituals and ate more snack bar food. Xander took notes over the items in dispute: Should a drug overdose earn more points for heroin or oxycodone? If a clan had already scored points for a celebrity's tattoo of his girlfriend, did they get more points when the pair broke up and the celebrity had the tattoo altered? Should the value of a drunkenly crashed vehicle be calculated into the points? How many botoxes equaled a breast implant, and did bigger implants get more points?

That night, they ate Mexican and watched

Comedy Central.

More arguments the next day and the next and the next, more swinging tails and flying rocks. Spike and Xander sampled quite a bit of the local cuisine and spent an hour together in front of the TV every night.

"You know," Xander said as they drove to the bowling alley for the eighth or ninth time, "I'm really glad you're here. Not just the translating, although that's good. But the company's even better."

Spike mumbled something and looked so adorable that Xander was tempted to order him to pull to the side of the highway and be ravished. But there was no ravishing, not then, not ever. Xander was keeping his promise to keep his hands to himself, and Spike didn't seem to want anything different.

And then, at very long last, the Jastmeros stopped talking. Xander stood and told them he'd consider everything they'd said. "Give me a

day, okay? Day after tomorrow, I'll have my recommendations for you."

Xander spent most of the next day alone in his room, poring over his pages and pages of notes, considering every question carefully. Mostly he was pretty sure how an issue should turn out, but every now and then he'd pad the few steps down the hallway and knock on the door to room 209. He didn't know what Spike was up to all day, but each time he answered the door right away.

"If a guy announces to the press that he's gay but everybody already knew it for years, does that count as coming out?" asked Xander.

Spike considered. "I'd give it half points."

"Okay."

An hour later, he'd have a different question: "Sexual harassment lawsuit is settled out of court—does that count the same as a jury decision?" or "Offhand racist comment later

gets retracted or is claimed to have been taken out of context. Points?" or "Stupid baby names. Do the parents get a pass if they're punk rock musicians or if they claim the name means something in Hawaiian?"

Spike's answers were pretty reasonable, and they helped a lot.

When dinnertime rolled around and Xander came over to ask whether purchases of ridiculously oversized mansions should be outscored by purchases of diamond-encrusted personal care products, Spike just shook his head. "Are you asking me because you want my advice or because you want me to feel useful?"

"The first one. If you want to feel useful I can gush about your fine interpreting skills. Or tell you again how happy I am to have spent the last days with you next to me instead of Giles."

Christ, when Spike smiled like that it took all of Xander's will not to rip off his clothes and lick him from top to bottom. And then back up

again.

Maybe Spike sensed Xander's lascivious thoughts, because he gave Xander's shoulder a gentle shove. "Go. Finish your deliberations."

With some regret, Xander did. He worked until very late at night, until his eye blurred with fatigue. But when he was through he was sad—not because he wanted to spend another minute worrying about the minutiae of celebrity life, and not because he was looking forward to another day of tail-waving and chanting. After tomorrow his job in LA would be complete, and he wasn't at all certain Spike would come back to Reno with him. Yes, Spike had a job in Reno, but here he had a big hotel almost entirely to himself and, it seemed, enough money to live in comfort. Maybe he'd decide it was more peaceful here. Maybe he was sick and tired of Xander's company.

The possibility of Spike remaining shouldn't have bothered Xander. They were friends, but Xander had other friends, and he was used to being

separated from them for months and months at a time. That was no big deal. He'd been living a happy and fulfilling life.

Except every time he thought about Spike, there was a terrible pulling feeling in his chest and his skin felt too tight. Xander wasn't positive, because he didn't have any real experience with the malady—but he was fairly certain. He'd fallen in love.

Part Ten

"Did you get any sleep at all?"

Xander sipped at his enormous coffee and watched the freeway traffic crawl along with them. "Couple hours."

"Humans need more than that."

"I'll catch up back at HQ."

Spike made that dismissive snorting noise and waved two fingers at a BMW that was trying to cut him off. Over the past few days he'd slowly been transforming himself back into his old sexy self—clothing-wise, at least—and today he wore a pair of low-slung jeans with a studded leather belt, a tight black T-shirt, and a black motorcycle jacket with lots of zippers and buckles. The combat boots were back too. He didn't look remotely like a super-strict schoolteacher. He also didn't look like he should be driving an Acura.

But he did drive his Acura and they rolled slowly to Monrovia. The bowling alley parking lot was completely full, which took them both by surprise, but one of the demons was waiting to guide them to an empty spot that had been reserved for them near the door.

Inside, the usual setup applied, but perhaps two hundred additional Jastmeros were standing or sitting on the polished wood of the lanes. Most were adults, but there were also plenty of

children, who were as Wonka-esque as their parents. All of them had decorated their tails with little colored streamers, and every one of them was wearing bowling shoes.

Xander and Spike took their usual seats. There was an especially long ceremony topped off by a rousing en masse rendition of something that was probably supposed to be a song but sounded to Xander like a duel between an icemaker and a lovesick cat. Then a representative from each side gave a long speech, the gist of which was that they appreciated the Council's help and they were thankful for Xander's and Spike's attention.

And then it was Xander's turn.

He felt more than a little stage fright as he stood in front of all those eyes. At least this time he wasn't wearing latex, feather boas, and horsehair. He shuffled the twin stacks of paper Clem had quickly copied for him on the hotel Xerox machine, and he cleared his throat.

"Thank you all for your hospitality. You've made us feel welcome and we've enjoyed working with you. I've thought really hard over the questions you've presented, and I've come up with answers that I think are fair and rational."

The crowd made a murmuring sound that he hoped was approval.

"Before I give you my suggestions, I wanted to congratulate you on modernizing your competition methods. Your children and grandchildren will thank you for allowing them to grow up in a world where they'll never have to fight to the death. I'm sure your forward thinking will be admired for generations. Maybe even some of the more violent species—like humans—will see you as a shining example."

The Jastmeros definitely liked that. They clapped their hands and waved their tails, and they beamed at him proudly. Spike whispered—very, very quietly—"Well done, Xan."

Which gave Xander confidence to finish. He held

up the thick sheaves of paper, one in each hand. "Whichever clan wins this particular round, I'm sure you're both worthy. And the clan that comes in second should remember that having the rules clarified will be helpful in all future competitions too."

Mom-jeans stood, as did a male demon on the other side who wore a lime green polo shirt. Both demons approached and, without looking at each other, solemnly took the papers from him. They returned to their own tables, where their colleagues immediately crowded around.

There was a very long wait while the demons read his recommendations and added up their points. The Jastmeros in the audience grew a little restless—several parents had to hush fussy kids. Xander was restless too. He had to work very hard to keep his legs from jiggling and his hands from fidgeting. To distract himself, he stared at Spike, who pretended not to notice. Spike had a sort of knobby chin and the tip of his nose canted very slightly to one side. Now that he was human he was aging like everybody else;

he had lines on his forehead and at the corners of his eyes. His hair would probably feel stiff and crunchy with all that gel. He smelled good. Not like cologne or aftershave—just soap and... Spike.

Oh, fuck. Xander was definitely in love.

The two tables of demons reached their totals almost simultaneously, and Xander could easily tell who had won: mom-jeans' clan. She and her pals and about half the audience looked cat-and-canary pleased, while everyone else was frowning. But nobody was trying to kill anyone else, and that was of the good.

A male on the losing side stood. He spoke in English: "Xander of the Council, while we are disappointed with the results, we respect your wisdom and guidance. We think you are an honorable creature. We accept these results."

Xander wanted to melt with relief, but he didn't have a chance, because mom-jeans stood and bowed at her opponents. "Thank you. We will

remember your good grace." She turned to Xander and bowed again. "And we also thank you, Xander of the Council and Spike Who Interprets. You will always be welcome among the great clans of the Jastmeros."

More speeches followed, this time in their language. Spike didn't bother translating, but that was fine. Xander figured they sounded pretty much like the statements the contenders made when any election was decided: "I'll do my best to live up to the faith that's been put in me," or "We're sorry about the results, of course, but we know we can work together with the other side to improve things for everyone."

Tails waved, colored rocks flew, children performed some sort of pageant. It was very festive. The entire thing was topped off by the presentation to mom-jeans of something that looked like a hockey trophy, and then the eating of that horrible cat food stuff. Spike and Xander got microwaved chicken nuggets.

It was with considerable relief that Xander was

able to shake a bunch of hands and, Spike at his side, leave the bowling alley for the last time.

Spike was oddly silent as they drove toward the late afternoon sun.

"Want to go out for a celebratory dinner?" Xander asked. "Council's buying."

"Nah. 'M knackered. Was going to try drive-through, yeah?"

Xander bit back his disappointment. "Yeah. Okay."

They ate their Whoppers without saying a word.

And then they returned to the hotel, where their footsteps echoed in the lobby and the ghosts of a thousand guests seemed to float just out of Xander's (admittedly limited) field of vision. They tromped slowly up the stairs. They both paused outside the door to 211.

"You were brilliant, Xan," said Spike, very

quietly, very seriously. "Managed those blokes just right. Council's bloody lucky to have a man like you."

A thick lump formed in Xander's throat, making it hard to talk. "Thanks. You were great too. if it wasn't for you—"

"You'd have done just as well. Didn't matter if it was me there or Rupert or one of those idiot baby Watchers. You don't need us."

Xander shook his head. "No, Spike. I really think I—"

"Good night." In an almost vampire-quick movement, Spike turned away, walked the few steps to 209, and went inside. Xander was alone in the hallway, feeling like he might start to cry.

After a minute or two, he entered his own room. He went straight to the bathroom, where he splashed some water on his face. He gave himself a stern look in the mirror. "Time to pull up your Underoos, Harris. Other fish in the sea,

remember? And lucky you, you happen to be minutes from the Pacific Ocean! Put on some sexy duds and find a club, and Mr. Happy will be playing in no time at all."

It wasn't a bad speech. If he were in a movie, rousing music would play and he'd march right out and get laid by a pair of identical twin demons with perfect asses, pretty lips, and twelve-inch dicks.

Instead, he kicked off his shoes, pulled off his clothing and eye patch, and climbed into bed. He pulled the covers up over his head like a little kid hiding from monsters. And he hoped really, really hard that he'd dream about anything but Spike.

Part Eleven

Spike returned to Reno—that much was good anyway. He went back to the classroom. He

didn't go back to the tweed, however, which left the students wondering how Mean Mr. Pratt had inexplicably become so hot during his trip to LA. He wasn't any easier on them, though, and while they were much happier to look at him they weren't any more pleased about the mounds of work he gave them. In fact, he gave them extra to make up for lost time.

Even Buffy noticed. One evening a couple weeks after they'd returned, she and Xander were eating sandwiches in her room, half-watching *Survivor* on TV. "What did you do to Spike in LA?"

"Nothing," Xander said miserably

Probably a little too miserably, because Buffy stopped chewing and turned to look at him.

"Oh. My. God. You have a thing for *Spike*."

"I do not."

"You totally do. You have that look in your eye. You've been writing *Mr. Xander Pratt* in your

notebooks with a little heart for the dot. You've been thinking up wedding vows and writing 'He's so DREAMY!' in your diary."

"I have not! I am a thirty-five-year-old man. I am the lead negotiator for the Watchers' Council. I am—" He stopped and sank his face into his hands. "I am totally fucked."

Buffy made a cackling noise of triumph. "Hah! I can't wait to tell Willow, and—and we have to call Dawn, she's gonna *die*."

He looked at her sadly. "There's nothing to tell, Buff. He doesn't want me."

"Pfft," she said. And then she rolled her eyes. "You're thirty-five and he's like... really old, and you've both done all this *stuff*, and you're still a pair of stupid boys."

"It's not stupid, Buff. Not everyone thinks I'm such a great catch—hell, nobody's been all that interested in something serious for a long time. And he's not really all that into guys."

This time she poked him. Hard. "Okay, first off, he and Angel had a fling way back in the eighteen-somethings. I read about it in that Watcher's diary Giles kept trying to hide from me. And don't think I haven't had some happy times thinking about that particular entry, Xander Harris." She smirked and he blushed, which was totally ridiculous. "And second, I know what Spike looks like when he's got it bad for someone, and boy, he really does."

"But... not me."

"Then who? He and I have been over forever and I don't think he's mooning about any of the trainees."

Xander shook his head. "If he's so crazy about me how come I hardly see him? He knows how I feel. I've given him plenty of chances."

"Because he has a Y chromosome, Xander. It's not like he's going to be logical about love. No, he's going to be stubborn and stupid and

miserable, because that's what men do."

Buffy may have had one too many unhappy romances, Xander concluded. Before he could say so, she poked him again. "Two days ago, I ended up with a whole delegation of baby Slayers in my office. They were complaining about Mr. Pratt again. He's making them learn Sanskrit, Xander. And read *Finnegan's Wake*. If he was still a vampire he'd be so, so slayed by now."

"So?"

"So my trainees are threatening to revolt, you're moping around, and what Spike really needs is a good, hard fuck."

He gasped. "Buffy!"

"Oh, grow *up*, Xander. I'm thirty-five too. I know the f-word." Her voice softened. "Be a little less sulking and a little more assertive. Man up, Xander. Go fight for your guy."

~*~*~*~*~

He didn't listen to Buffy—not that night. But he did make an effort to seek Spike out at the pool in the afternoon, and Spike was there, willing to resume their old friendly chats. They started eating dinner together again too, and then hanging out. It was good. But they never touched one another, and there was a certain wariness in their interactions that hadn't been there before.

The students complained. Xander thought about what Buffy had said. Spike... Spike just looked wary, of what Xander wasn't sure.

One night Xander avoided Spike, purposely staying in his own suite until way past dinnertime, eating a bag of Doritos he'd stashed away. Then he put on his sexiest clothes and fussed with his hair before slipping out a side door to the parking lot, where a taxi was waiting to take him to Ace in the Hole.

He got drunk. He got groped. He danced. He even went so far as to let a wiry demon with blond hair and pale blue skin drag him to a corner for a little ardent frothing. But when the demon took his hand and tried to guide him to one of those back rooms, Xander gently pulled away. "Sorry. You're really hot. But my mind's somewhere else tonight." A lie—it was really his heart that was somewhere else.

The demon pouted for a moment before slipping back into the crowd.

Xander went back out into the brisk night air and walked. He didn't head for the river; this time he turned in the direction of HQ, which was several miles away. Maybe by the time he got there his head would be clear.

But it wasn't. The alcohol was gone and the sky had already begun to lighten. But he still didn't know what the hell to do. He wanted to take Buffy's advice, but what if she was wrong? What if he screwed up his friendship with Spike? Sure, friendship wasn't love, wasn't what Xander was

yearning for, but it was lots better than nothing.

He entered the building and nodded at the sleepy-looking Slayer on duty. She was sitting on the old reception desk, practicing tricks with a deck of cards. He watched her for a moment, almost hypnotized by the fast movements.

"Wanna play a couple rounds of blackjack?" she asked.

"Last time we played you cardsharped me out of twenty bucks."

She grinned impishly. "We can do double or nothing this time."

Double or nothing. Everything you wanted or nothing at all. Was it worth the gamble?

Hell. This *was* Reno after all.

~*~*~*~*~

He felt almost bright eyed and bushy tailed after

a few hours of sleep. He showered. He shaved. He made himself presentable. He detoured by the kitchen and had toast and coffee. When he was finished, he stood in an empty hallway, trying to breathe normally. And then he headed to the classroom.

Spike's voice was audible through the door; he sounded especially animated today. He paused momentarily when Xander entered the room and raised his scarred eyebrow, and then went right back to yelling about the proper usage of plural possessives. Oh, he was sexy when he got excited about grammar. Eh, who was Xander trying to kid—Spike was sexy all the time.

For a full five minutes, Xander stood near the side of the room, watching Spike teach. The students kept trying to sneak curious glances at him, but Spike would catch them and make them diagram a sentence. He moved a lot while he taught, his eyes flashing dangerously.

Spike was in the middle of a harangue on the difference between *i.e.* and *e.g.* when Xander

decided he'd had enough. He marched to the middle of the room, intercepting Spike in midpace.

"What?" Spike demanded.

Xander grabbed him, pulling him in for a kiss.

It was not the world's greatest kiss. Spike clearly wasn't expecting it, and he tensed up. The assembled audience of teenaged Slayers and Watchers gasped in unison—except for one person who wolf-whistled. But it was a kiss, a true meeting of lips, and Spike didn't pull away or squawk with indignation or bash Xander over the head. In fact, there toward the end, he actually relaxed in Xander's arms—just the teeniest, tiniest bit—and gave a little lip action in return.

Xander stepped back and looked at him expectantly.

Spike turned to the class. "All of you—out. Now."

Never before had these students been reluctant to leave the classroom, but now they very slowly gathered their papers and books and pencils, looking around as if they feared they might be leaving something precious behind. "Now!" Spike roared. "You have ten seconds to get out, or I'm assigning a twenty-page paper on the use of imagery in Faulkner's *The Bear*."

Well, that worked. Slayer speed came in handy as the students sprinted away. Even the baby Watchers managed to clear out pretty quickly.

Which left Spike and Xander alone in the room, staring at each other.

"Well?" Spike said.

"That was pretty much my most convincing argument, actually."

"Argument for what?"

"For... us. For fishing. For finding out whether I

can do a better job than Angel of convincing you that bi-way is the right way. For... for finding out how well our parts fit together."

Spike paused a moment before shaking his head slowly. "No."

Xander fought back the sick feeling in his gut. "Why not? It wasn't a bad kiss. You didn't hate it. And I can do much, much better."

"I'll wager you can." Spike almost smiled. "Your demon girl—she told me a few stories about you."

Under other circumstances, Xander would have blushed. But now he just said, "See? And I've had way more practice since then, especially with guys. So why the no?"

"It's that loads of practice bit, actually."

"I— You don't want me because I'm *easy*?"

Spike barked a harsh laugh. "*You* are never easy.

You're one of the most bloody difficult people I've ever met, and believe me, I've met quite a few."

"I don't get it."

"Xander, I...." Spike paused to sigh and run his hand through his hair, messing up the gelled perfection. "I'm *not* easy. Told you before, I've had only a few lovers in a very long existence. I don't do one-night stands or friends with benefits. Bloody hell, I even stayed with Harmony for a while and you know what she was like. If I... if I get intimate with someone, it's for real. It's for good. It opens a wound in my stupid heart that never, ever heals. I haven't the strength for another wound, Xander."

They'd been standing several feet apart, but now Xander moved closer, near enough to feel Spike's quick breaths against his face. But he didn't touch Spike, not quite. "I don't want a quickie," Xander said in a low voice. "I want real. I want, maybe, forever. No broken hearts."

For a moment, Spike looked so vulnerable, so young, that Xander just wanted to hold him tight and never let him go. But he didn't. He waited for Spike to answer. When Spike did, his voice was cracked. "You deserve that. You're a good man, Xander Harris. But not with me."

"Because?"

"Because you can do so much better. You're— I watched you in LA. You were clever. You managed those demons as adeptly as anyone could have. You've found your confidence and your purpose. And I'm just... just a bloody schoolteacher who jumps at his own shadow."

"Oh, get *over* yourself, Spike!"

Spike blinked. "What?"

Xander moved a few steps away, then turned to stare irritably. "You weren't that great of a vampire, Spike. You really weren't. Yeah, I know you slaughtered thousands, yadda yadda. Except you weren't all that great at it, were you? I

mean, you never even managed to kill me, and I was pathetic. You got clobbered by Buffy's mother and caught by soldiers, you lost that magic ring right away, and none of your evil plans ever amounted to anything."

"This is meant to win me over?"

"No, it's supposed to make you see reason. Spike, you weren't that great a vampire but you were always a good *man*. You stuck with Drusilla forever, even when she was a faithless tease. You sided against Angel and that Acatla thing. You watched over Dawn when Buffy was dead. You went all the way to Africa and you fought for your soul. And then you sacrificed yourself under Sunnydale and almost died again with Angel in LA. And you did those things because of who you are as a man, Spike." Xander came closer again, reached out, and settled his palm against Spike's chest. "You're still that man. You've already made that hole in my heart. Be *my* man, Spike."

So Xander was never going to be a speechwriter.

But he meant every word he said, with every atom in his body and every bit of his mind. Xander had manned up. Double or nothing.

For a long and horrible minute, he wasn't sure whether he had won the gamble. But then Spike smiled—wide and hopeful and maybe a little bit lascivious—and launched himself at Xander hard enough to topple them both to the floor.

This kiss—now this kiss was something special. Spike was on top of Xander, pinning him down, and their hands were wandering rapidly over one another's bodies as if they couldn't wait to feel every single inch. And their mouths were open and their tongues were tangoing, and Spike had soft lips and sharp teeth and he tasted like sugary tea.

But soon that wasn't enough. They tore at their shirts, sending buttons flying, and Xander breathed a silent prayer of thanks that Spike had given up on neckties. They lay, naked chest against naked chest, feeling their hearts beating very fast, fingers kneading at the soft skin at

each other's waist.

That was good for a little while, but they needed more. Spike arched up a little so they could unfasten, and their shoes were still on, so their jeans bunched up awkwardly near their knees, restricting their movements. But neither cared because this was what they were looking for. Xander had a double handful of Spike's incredible ass, and Spike was bucking and writhing and gnawing at Xander's lip, licking at his earlobe, sucking on his neck—apparently he had a habit or two left over from his vampire days. Oh, it was glorious, and when it occurred to Spike to wrap his long-fingered hand around both their hard lengths, to rub and squeeze just so, it was almost more than Xander could stand.

Spike came first, shouting out as if taken by surprise, and Xander followed him over the cliff just a second or two later.

Then they lay still, breathing hard, bellies sticky. Xander felt melty all over and Spike sure didn't seem inclined to move.

"Good *Lord*," Spike wheezed, which made Xander snort with laughter.

"Better than Angel?"

"Indubitably."

"Then imagine how good it's gonna be in about an hour, when all the clothes are gone and we're in my comfy bed with a nice big bottle of Boy Butter close at hand."

Spike shuddered and emitted a small moan, and Xander felt Spike's cock twitch against his groin. Xander decided to be a little bit evil—it was his turn for it. He whispered in Spike's ear: "The only real question is who gets to be the butterer and who's the butteree, because I'm good either way. Or we could take turns."

Spike bit him—mostly gently—right at the crook of his neck.

Then the classroom door banged open and two

dozen students plus Buffy managed to burst in at once.

Spike sort of yelled, and Xander held on tight to keep him from standing and running away, which would have left them both exposed and certainly ended up with someone tripping over his jeans and falling on his ass. Always the gentleman, Xander pulled down Spike's shirttail so that his ass was mostly covered.

The silence was very, very pregnant.

"Erm," said Spike at last. "Class is dismissed for the day. Go... go memorize the periodic table. Exam first thing tomorrow."

Nobody moved. It was Buffy who finally turned to the kids and clapped her hands briskly. "Okay, guys. This concludes today's sex ed lesson. Scram."

The students did leave—unwillingly—but Buffy stayed behind to look down at the men on the floor.

"You can go now," Xander said to her, maybe a little tightly.

She smiled. "In a sec. Just storing in my memory banks, for... well, never mind." She winked.

"Congrats, boys. Be good to each other. If either of you breaks the other's heart I'll kick your ass." Then she left too.

Spike dropped his head onto Xander's shoulder. "They'll never respect me now."

"Oh, sure they will. Just make them write a research paper on the Crimean War or something and they'll forget all about it. Well, they might not forget *this*." He squeezed Spike's ass. "It's pretty damned memorable."

Spike started to chuckle, which soon evolved into full-blown laughter. Xander joined him. It felt so damn good to laugh together like that—almost as good as the sex. Still snickering a little, Spike climbed off and gave Xander a sticky hand up. They fumbled themselves back into what

was left of their clothes.

"My room?" Xander said.

"Yeah," Spike answered with a smile.

They kept their arms wrapped around each other's shoulders as they walked down the hall. And for the very first time, Xander felt like he was going home.

The End