

*Rating: Mature*

*Length: 14,000 words*

*Summary: I play with the Groundhog Day trope.*

*Spike and Xander live with the consequences.*

*Disclaimer: They aren't mine, and I'm not making any money.*

*Many thanks to  [yourlibrarian](#) for beta-reading and general awesomeness.*

## **Longest. Day. Ever.**

by

**Shadowscast**

### **Saturday: Prologue**

We cornered the demon mage in Adam's old cave in the Sunnydale woods. Buffy went in first with her sword. Me and Willow followed at a safe-ish distance, me with an axe and her with a crossbow. We were kickin' it old-school, just the three of us. Dawn was home studying, Anya had been lying low ever since the cursed letterman's jacket, and Spike

was busy being crazy in my apartment. Hopefully not getting blood in the peanut butter again.

Buff and the mage were in a standoff when we caught up to them. The mage had his back against a wall, but his pet kitty was crouching at his feet, growling in our direction -- and by "pet kitty," I mean "two-headed saber-toothed tiger from one of the nastier hell dimensions." Also, the mage was holding a small wooden box over his head like it meant something.

"Walk away, Slayer," the demon mage hissed through his excessively numerous pointy teeth. "If you kill me, my doomsday device will destroy your world at midnight tomorrow!"

"That'd be the shoebox?" Buffy asked. She didn't sound especially worried. Seriously, if the three of us had a dollar for every time some upstart black hat had threatened to destroy the world ... well, okay, we wouldn't be *rich*, but we'd definitely be able to go out for pizza. With extra toppings.

The mage laughed and shook the box. It rattled. "This shoebox? Slayer? Is a Damian's Detonator. The spell contained in it will blow the seal on the Hellmouth sky high!" In his gloating excitement he apparently lost his balance a little bit. He stumbled a step or two sideways, and stepped on his kitty friend's tail.

What came next was hard for me to follow in the dim light, especially from my strategic defensive position behind an outcropping of rock. The demon cat let out a shriek that sounded like steel girders buckling and leapt for the mage's throat. The mage batted at the cat's face in a futile attempt to save himself. The box he'd been making such a fuss about went skittering off into a corner. Buffy rushed in with her sword and cut off one of the cat's heads. The mage crumpled to the ground. The cat howled and swatted at Buffy, but she parried and sliced open the cat's remaining throat. The cat collapsed.

Willow and I moved cautiously out of cover. "Oh, I wondered where you guys were," Buffy said. She poked at the demon's fallen body with the toe of

her boot. "Well, that fight sure took an unexpected turn."

"We'd better check out this Detonator thingy," Willow said. She'd already retrieved it from the floor of the cave. "Do you think he was bluffing?"

"I'm betting yeah," Buffy said, wiping her sword clean on the dead mage's burlap robe. "He seemed kind of incompetent."

"Never underestimate the destructive power of the incompetent!" I said.

"True. Okay." Willow stuffed the box in her knapsack, and then stifled a yawn. "I'll look at it tomorrow morning."

**Sunday: 8! Days a Week**

The next morning, when I stumbled out of my bedroom, I was met by an unprecedented sight and smell: Spike was in the kitchen, cooking.

"Have I just walked into a parallel universe?" I asked. "Let me know. I'll go back to sleep and hope to hell I wake up in the right one next time."

Spike rolled his eyes and waved a spatula at me. "Go have your shower. Brekkers'll be ready when you are."

He was wearing a t-shirt, so I could see that his arms were all carved up. "Oh God Spike, not again with the cutting," I said. At this rate he was *never* going to be ready move out of my apartment.

He shrugged and turned back to his cooking. "Again and again and again and again," he sang softly over the sizzling of the bacon grease.

So, it looked like today was going to be towards the *more* end of the more-or-less crazy spectrum. But hey, at least today's menu of insanity apparently

included scrambled eggs and bacon. Things could be worse. I decided that seven-thirty on a Sunday morning was too early to worry about Spike's mental health. I went and had a long hot shower.

Spike had left all my towels in a damp heap on the bathroom floor. Again. Damn him.

I was just finishing getting dressed when the phone rang. I heard Spike answer it in the kitchen, so I went out there with one shoe on.

"It's for you," he said, holding it out to me. I got a better look at the cuts on his arms -- they weren't random, it was a string of capital letters. Didn't spell anything, though. Too many consonants. Unless maybe it was Polish?

I took the phone, giving Spike a good glare. "I told you not to answer the phone," I whispered. "Hello?"

"Xander!" Willow said. "Something's come up. The Detonator is going to be more of a problem than we thought. How soon can you get here?"

"Ten minutes." I hung up. "Too bad, Spike, I don't have time to guinea pig your cooking--" I shut up when he handed me a sandwich wrapped in wax paper and a travel mug of coffee.

"I made yours to go," he said.

"Er, what?" I said. I wondered if I'd let go of my parallel-universe theory too hastily.

"I want you to go to Blockbuster and get *The Princess Diaries* for me before you go over to Buffy's house." He looked at me expectantly, blue eyes wide open.

Um, okay. Spike was having a craaa-zy day, no doubt about it.

"Sorry, no time for detours," I said. "Willow says there's trouble brewing."

"Nothing that can't wait an extra ten minutes," Spike said. "If you don't get me the movie, I'll vomit

blood on your bed."

"Euch," I winced. "Gross, Spike." I tried to think of a fast way to deal with Spike without giving in, but came up blank. I was fresh out of shackles. "Okay, okay, I'll get you the damn movie. But if you mess up my bed, I swear to God I'll stake you."

"Good then," he said, pressing the food and coffee into my hands and propelling me towards the door. "See you in ten."

On the way to the Blockbuster I considered skipping the movie run and going straight to Buffy's place. But then there was no telling what Spike would do to my apartment.

Also, to be fair, the bacon-and-egg sandwich was delicious.

So I went into the Blockbuster, and I started towards the comedy section, but then my general irritation with the whole me-looking-after-Spike deal caught up with me. "Fuck you, Spike," I said to

myself, and I grabbed the first thing I saw off the nearest shelf -- *Jurassic Park*. "If you're gonna leave your wet towels all over the bathroom floor, you can watch whatever the hell I bring you."

Surprisingly, he wasn't upset. "Cheers mate, I haven't seen this one in years!" he said when I handed him the DVD case.

"Yeah, well, enjoy." I glanced around the apartment, taking stock so that I'd know immediately if anything was messed up when I got back. "Stay inside, keep the drapes closed, and don't answer the phone."

Spike flipped me two fingers and shut the door in my face.

"You're welcome," I said.

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"Come in!" Buffy said.

"So, what's the crisis today, and can I interest you in a donut?" I held up the box I'd bought on the way over.

"No, thanks," Buffy said.

"I got a jelly one just for you."

"They forgot to put it in," she said.

"Huh?"

Buffy was already walking away from me. I followed her into the dining room and put the donuts on the table next to the dead mage's wooden box. Dawn immediately reached over and plucked out a chocolate one. Willow was at the table too, with her laptop open. I looked into the box. Buffy was right; there was no jelly donut.

"Giles is sending over the first of the scanned pages now," Willow said.

"Wait, but Buffy, how did you know there'd be no jellies?" I looked at her. She looked tired. Frazzled. "Oh God, you're not telepathic again are you?"  
*Don't think about sex. Don't think about sex.*

She rolled her eyes. "Xander, *you* didn't know there wasn't a jelly donut. So I obviously didn't read your mind."

"You're never going to believe this, Xander," Dawn said around her mouthful of donut.

"Sure he will," Buffy said. "He always has so far."

"Huh?" I said.

Willow looked up from her computer. "She's from the future!"

"What?!" I took a step back from Buffy. She *looked* normal. "Are you sure?"

"I'm pretty sure," Buffy said drily.

"But--"

"You're about to remind us of last year when that demon pretended to be *you* from the future and gave you those false visions and scared you off from marrying Anya," Buffy interrupted me. "This is totally different. I'm not old or anything. I'm from later today."

I frowned. "How did you know what I was going to say?"

"Because you already *said* it, the first time we went through this. And the second, and the third..." Buffy flopped down in a chair and pressed her hands to her face. "God I'm getting bored of this conversation."

I felt like I was losing the signal. I looked to Willow for help. "What's she talking about?"

"Maybe I should take it from the beginning," Willow said. "Remember how the mage last night said this Damian's Detonator would blow the lid off the

Hellmouth if we killed him?" She nudged the shoebox-sized wooden object across the table towards me. "Turns out he wasn't bluffing after all."

"Well, that's not good," I understatement-ed. I went to grab the box for a closer look, then stopped myself. "Is it safe to touch?"

"Sure," Buffy said. "As far as we've been able to tell, it's pretty much inert until midnight."

*As far as we've been able to tell* was not the most reassuring phrase I'd ever heard, but if Buffy really was from the future, I guessed she knew what she was talking about.

The box was made of mahogany, inlaid with ash and maple in an intricate pattern. There were pentacles and crescent moons and lots of other symbols I didn't recognize. It looked like something Anya would've sold at the Magic Box, back in the day. It was surprisingly heavy, even for mahogany.

"Go ahead and open it," Willow said.

The top fitted snugly, but it came off. Inside, wooden slats divided the box into eight square compartments. Each compartment held a smooth-sided cube of a different color.

"You can take them out," Willow said. "They were all jumbled anyway when I picked it up last night."

I lifted the red one out and held it in the palm of my hand. It felt like polished stone -- granite, maybe. It glittered in the light from the window. "What do they do?"

"It's a key," Willow said. "A sort of magical combination lock. If all eight stones aren't in the right compartments at midnight, the spell will be triggered, and kaboom!"

"And then, what, it sends Buffy back in time?" I was having trouble seeing how time travel fit into this picture.

"No, I did that," Willow said. "Er, will do. Me in the

future."

"We weren't sure how to arrange the stones, and we realized that if we had only one chance to get it right, we might fail," Buffy said. "So Willow had the idea that if we got the combination wrong, she could send me back in time one day along my own timeline."

"If at first you don't succeed, try, try again!" Dawn chirped.

"It's not funny," Buffy said, glaring at her. "I've been at it for nearly two weeks now! Every day we spend the day trying to guess what combination the demon mage set. Every day we fail, I try some combination off the top of my head, the Hellmouth blows up, and Willow sends me back to do it all again."

"Have you tried going back to the cave and checking the mage's corpse for clues?" I suggested. "Maybe he wrote the combination on his underwear. That's what I would've done."

Buffy sighed. "We tried that on day *one*, Xander. And day two. And several other days between then and now. But hey, if you feel like it, knock yourself out."

"There's no sense repeating our efforts from earlier in the time loop," Willow said. "We've got to be systematic about this." She tore a piece of paper out of a spiral-bound notebook and pushed it towards Buffy. "How about you write down all the combinations you've tried so far, and the rest of us will start reading the stuff Giles sent us."

"Giles knows about this?" I asked.

"I called him as soon as I woke up this morning," Buffy said.

I scratched my head. "How could you even sleep? I mean, considering."

Buffy shrugged. "I always fall asleep when Willow sends me back. Maybe it's because I'm going back

into my own sleeping body? I mean, when I go back, I take the place of past-Buffy. There aren't two of me running around here."

"Thank God," Dawn added -- which got her a glare from Buffy.

So we got to work -- Buffy, Willow, Dawn and me around the Summers' dining table, and Giles in England, checking in by phone. He had books that mentioned Damian's Detonator, but there was nothing about how to disarm it.

"Could we just destroy it?" I suggested.

"We tried that on day five," Buffy said. "Didn't work. Destroying the box triggered the spell early. Willow barely managed to pull her time-travel spell together in time to send me back before we got eaten." She shuddered. "You and Dawn were dead by then. I saw you both killed by the demons that live in the Hellmouth."

Dawn went around the table to hug Buffy. "It's

okay. We're okay now."

Buffy returned the hug fiercely. "Yeah. And there will be no more destroying of the box."

"What if Willow sends you back a bit further?" I suggested. "Then you could stop the stupid mage from stepping on his cat's tail."

Willow shook her head. "No can do. I know the spell that Buffy's talking about -- I mean, I would've had to, because I'm the one who thought of it the first time, right? -- and it doesn't allow for much fine-tuning. I can only send her back to last midnight. And it's going to be hard, too. I mean, I hope you won't be expecting me to cast any other spells this week, 'cause I'm gonna be burned out, big-time."

"How big?" I looked at her, worried. "This isn't one of those black-eyed, veiny spells, is it?"

"It'll be all right," Buffy said quickly. "It's been all right so far." Something about her tone made me wonder, but when I caught her eye she just looked

away. I trusted her, so I let it go.

We went back to reading. We didn't have a library at Buffy's house; we were depending on Giles to send us images of any pages with potential. Good thing one of his Watcher buddies had finally taught him how to use a scanner.

It was a bit weird, trying to build on our own research from previous trips around the time loop. We depended on Buffy to tell us which dead ends we'd already gone down. She, in turn, was guided by the advice Giles and Willow had given her "yestertoday." ("Yestertoday," Buffy repeated. "Do you like that word? I made it up.")

"We're looking for color patterns that would've been significant to the mage," Buffy explained. "Maybe there's a numerological connection or something."

"What if he just stuck the blocks in at random?" asked Dawn.

"Then we're screwed," Willow said. "There's eight factorial possible arrangements."

"That doesn't sound like a lot," I said.

Willow gave me a patient look that I recognized from tenth grade math class. "It is," she said. "It's about forty thousand different patterns. It would take Buffy over a hundred years to try every single one."

Dawn reached for another chocolate donut. "Well, but she *could*, right? I mean, hello, time travel?"

"Well, that depends," I pointed out. "On whether or not she's getting older in this loop."

"I think we're okay there," Buffy said. "I mean, I think I go back into my same body every night. No matter what I'm wearing at midnight when Willow does the spell, I wake up back in my yummy sushi pajamas." Then her eyes went wide. "Oh God. My period started this morning."

You'd think, after so many years of having girls for my best friends, I'd be beyond embarrassment, but apparently not. I felt my neck get warm. "Um, do you want me to make a tampon run?" I asked, trying to sound like I was really perfectly cool with it.

Everyone ignored me. Unlike me, Willow had realized the significance of Buffy's TMI-outburst. "*This* this morning?" she asked.

Buffy nodded. "Yeah."

"Then time *is* passing for you."

"She can't keep trying different patterns for a hundred years," Dawn translated.

"Seventy or eighty years, tops," Buffy said. "And that would mean I'd be spending my whole life on this problem. I'd be an old lady by Monday. Oh God."

"Let's not panic," Willow suggested. "You've only

tried thirteen patterns so far, you said. There still might be an obvious solution." She grabbed a blank piece of paper and wrote out: **W R O Y G B V K**

"Wait a second," I said. "What did you just write there?"

"The colors," Willow said. "White-red-orange-yellow-green-blue-violet-black. Um, I used K for black, since I'd already used B for blue."

"Those letters." I was so excited I stood up. "I've seen those letters. Earlier today. Carved into Spike's arm."

"What?!" Buffy said.

"In that same order?!" Willow demanded at the same time.

"No, not that order. A different order. It was the same letters though, I'm sure of it. I thought it was just another Spike-being-crazy thing."

"This is new," Buffy said, knocking her chair back. She looked a little freaked out. "This has never happened before."

"You think it's the answer?" Dawn asked. "You think Spike's gone all clairvoyant somehow?"

"He sees things the rest of us don't see," I said. "That's for damn sure."

Willow snapped her computer closed and stood up. "We have to talk to him." She grabbed the piece of paper where she'd written the letters and stuffed it in her pocket. "Now."

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Spike was sitting on my couch, drinking blood from my favorite mug. He ignored the four of us piling through the door.

"Spike," Buffy said, "Show me your arms."

"Here we go again," he sighed. Which seemed to

me like a strange thing to say. He put the mug down on the floor and extended his arm.

"B-Y-V-G-R-O-W-K!" Buffy called out. I wondered if one of us should be writing this down.

"Look at his other arm," Willow said. She was seeing what I'd seen earlier in the morning -- half-healed cuts on Spike's left arm, similar to the fresher ones on his right.

Spike obediently held his arm out to Buffy. "These ones are nearly healed," she said. She looked at Spike's two arms side by side for a moment.

"They're almost the same, but not quite. The last three letters are different. WOK instead of OWK."

"But what does it mean?" Willow asked. "Two patterns, almost the same. They can't both be right. Spike, what do you know about the Damian's Detonator?"

"Only what you've told me, Red," Spike said.

"But I haven't told you ... anything ..." Willow trailed off, looking thoughtful.

Spike, meanwhile, extricated his arms from Buffy's grasp and settled back on the couch with a patient expression. Like he was our kindly kindergarten teacher.

"We just realized that Buffy is aging within the time loop," Willow said slowly, like she was working out the solution to the puzzle as she talked.

"Er," I felt compelled to interrupt, "Spike doesn't know about the time loop yet."

"Yes he does," Willow said.

"Yes I do," Spike confirmed.

"But how?" Dawn asked. I was glad I wasn't the only one feeling left in the dark here.

"Buffy was surprised when Xander said that Spike had letters cut into his arms," Willow reminded us.

"That was new -- a change from yestertoday. But how could that even be possible?"

"It's only possible if Spike is from the future, *too*," Buffy said.

Spike nodded.

"But how did you travel back in time too?" Dawn asked. "And from when?"

"I sent him," Willow said. Then she looked to Spike. "Right?"

He nodded. "Keep going, Red. They like the explanation better when it comes from you than when it comes from me."

"Once we saw that Buffy was aging in the time loop, we realized that we couldn't keep sending her back again and again while we tried to work out the right permutation of colors," Willow said. "We decided to send back somebody who *wouldn't* age. Thus: Spike."

"But we just realized that Buffy's getting older *twenty minutes* ago," I objected. And then my brain caught up. "Oh. I hate time travel." I glared at Spike. "Why the hell didn't you say something this morning?"

"You would've brought me over to Buffy's house right away," he pointed out. "I wanted to watch a video first."

We all stared at him. "You traveled back in time to *save the world*," I said incredulously, "and then you took the morning off to watch *Jurassic* fucking *Park*?"

"You're the one who picked the bloody movie," he retorted, a bit petulant. "I *asked* for the Princess Diaries, didn't I?"

"Has everyone figured out what's going on except for me?" Dawn asked plaintively.

"This isn't the first time today has happened," I

explained, feeling actually pretty pleased with myself for having figured it out ahead of *somebody*.

"We knew that. Buffy told us first thing this morning," Dawn said. She looked frustrated.

"No, I mean this isn't the first time we've had the version of the day where Buffy gets her, um, period," I said. And then involuntarily glanced at Spike, because I realized that he could probably *smell* it, and that was about ten times as embarrassing as just talking about it. Oh God.

"Right, this is getting tedious," Spike said. "Let's skip to the end. You lot asked me to take over from Buffy. I agreed. Willow sent me back. Rinse, repeat."

"And future-us figured out the right pattern of colors, and cut it into your arms!" I finished. "Which seems a little extreme, actually. Couldn't you have just, like, *remembered* it?"

Spike made a long-suffering expression and turned

back to Willow. "They won't see it till you spell it out for them, Red."

Willow, meanwhile, was looking a little shaken. "It's two different permutations," she pointed out.

"Almost the same but not quite. We -- we never did figure out the right pattern, did we? We're sending you back in time again and again until you try *all* of them."

Buffy's eyes went really wide. "All forty thousand, three hundred and twenty?"

"Don't worry, pet." Spike said. "We've got it down to a fine art. Red figured out a nice orderly system so's I never try the same pattern twice." Suddenly he was standing next to Willow and, with a smirk, copping a feel. No, wait, he was picking her pocket. He extracted a crumpled piece of paper. "This is the starting point," he said to Willow. "Then there's some kind of order to it, makes sense to you."

Willow nodded, glancing back and forth between her paper -- it was the one she'd written the colors

on back at Buffy's house -- and Spike's arms. "Okay, I see. So the next one is B-Y-V-G-R-O-K-W." She looked at him again. "But it would've taken over *eighty years* to get this far."

Spike tilted his head, gave us that long-suffering patient look again. "Well, yeah. So let's get on with it, right?"

We all stared at Spike. Dawn found her voice first. "You've been stuck in this day for eighty years?"

He chuckled her gently under the chin. "It's not as bad as it sounds, Niblet. Think of it like a long, peaceful vacation."

Buffy looked horrified. I guess it made sense; a little while ago she'd been complaining about how bored she was after just two weeks of repetition. "We'll fix it, Spike," she swore. "We'll hit the books harder than ever, we'll find the mage's lair, we'll--"

He touched her arm, lightly, shaking his head. "Appreciate it, Slayer, but believe me, you

exhausted every lead a long, long time ago."

"But I have to do *something*," Buffy insisted.

Spike turned to me. "Harris, gimme your notebook."

I kept a little chubby notebook and a pencil stub in my jeans pocket for writing down materials lists and stuff. Not something I'd have expected Spike to know about -- but I guess in the past eighty years he'd had time to learn the contents of *all* our pockets.

God. I kind of felt sorry for the guy. No wonder he'd seemed weirder than usual this morning.

I handed him the notebook and pencil. He quickly filled a couple of pages with loose, scrawling writing, then ripped them out and handed them to Buffy. "Complete list of people, puppies and kittens needing saving in Sunnydale today," he said. "If you get started now, you can hit them all."

"But..." Buffy's protest died out as she scanned the

list, and then her eyebrows shot up. "12:23, corner of Lincoln and Vine, kitten runs in front of car? Are you serious?"

Spike shrugged. "It's a slow day for evil."

"Anyway, what's the point of saving kittens?" I said. "This whole day is just going to repeat again tomorrow."

"Or not," Spike said, absently fiddling with my pencil. "Gonna hit the right pattern someday. This could be the day. You never know. Anyhow, if it does repeat, none of you lot will remember. No harm done."

Buffy fingered the ragged-edged piece of paper. "You've given me this list before."

"Thousands of times. Took a while to refine it, but it was important to you. It's not all puppies and kittens, Slayer."

"8:45, Shady Acres, Johnson tomb, vampire attack,"

Buffy read. "Etcetera. Yeah. Okay. So I guess I'd better get going right now if I'm gonna save that kitten."

"Take the Niblet with you," Spike said. "She can look after Fluffy while you run along to your 12:37."

"Espresso Pump, barista scalds self while cleaning milk steamer," Buffy read from the list. "Um, okay. Let's go, Dawn."

"Fluffy?" was Dawn's parting shot on her way out the door. "Eighty years and you couldn't think of a cooler name than *Fluffy*?"

Spike had his pack of cigarettes out the moment the door shut behind her. "She's the one who named the bloody thing," he muttered. "So, Red, you're going to need most of the day to prepare that spell. Give me tomorrow's permutation and get going."

"Oh." Willow started. "Right. So that you can, um."

"Harris will do it," Spike corrected her.

"I'll do what?" I asked.

Spike tucked a cigarette between his lips, lit it, and then held out his left arm. The one with the half-healed cuts.

"Oh," I said. I decided that now was not a good time to ream him out for smoking in my apartment.

"Ever consider using a Sharpie?"

"Tried it," Spike said. "Didn't work. The ink didn't come back with me."

Willow double-checked Spike's arms and her paper, and then wrote down a new jumble of letters for us. "Here it is," she said. "Good luck."

Spike took the paper, and took a deep drag on his cigarette. "We'll meet back at Revello Drive at twenty to midnight," he said. "No worries, Red. You'll do fine."

And then she left, and I was alone with Spike.

"Right," he said. "Use the box cutter from the bits-n-bobs drawer, it's nice and sharp."

I was feeling a little squeamish -- which was ironic, considering that taking a sharp blade to Spike's flesh used to be a favorite fantasy of mine. "Couldn't you do it yourself?" I asked on my way back with the knife.

"Sometimes I do on right-arm days," Spike said. "But I always make a right hash of it when I try to do for myself on the left."

Of course, he was left-handed. I'd been vaguely aware of that. "I see your point." Point, haha. But it wasn't funny. I wondered if I should offer him a drink.

"It's all right, if I wanted to get drunk I would've downed your Cap'n Morgan before you even got here," he said.

Okay, that was creepy. "How did you know I was

about to--?"

Spike rolled his eyes. "We've had this conversation before, berk." He sauntered over to the dining room table and laid his arm out. "Get it over with, would you?"

I've got to give Spike credit -- he was tough. When I started the first cut I didn't press hard enough, and then I pressed too hard and the knife blade sank a quarter of an inch into his pale cold flesh. He barely flinched, just sucked a little harder on his cigarette. *Every day for eighty years.* For the first five letters, I could follow the pink lines of the scars from two days ago. "Is it always me?" I asked. I was about to clarify -- *how many times have I carved up your arm?* but then I realized we'd probably had *this* conversation before, too, and he knew what I meant.

"Nowadays, yeah," Spike said after he blew a lungful of smoke away from me. "Used to be Red, in the beginning."

I was up to V now. A nice, easy letter to slice into someone's arm. G came next, which was harder. Spike's blood was seeping onto my table. Vampires don't bleed as badly as humans -- no circulation. Still, you cut them, they leak. I should've put a towel out. *Spike* should've put a towel out. He was the one who'd done this thirty thousand times already.

"Why the Princess Diaries?" I asked. Not to get his mind off what I was doing, but to get *my* mind off it. The smell of blood and tobacco was making me queasy.

"No matter what movie I ask you for, you get me a different one," he said. "I'm trying to work my way through the whole Blockbuster by asking you for whatever movie you brought me the day before. Tomorrow I'll ask you for Jurassic Park, see what it gets me." He grinned. "Hopefully a porno. You brought me a porno once, when I asked for It's A Wonderful Life."

I'd finished with the letters, thank God. "Don't go anywhere," I said. "I'm gonna get you some

bandages."

There were bandages aplenty in my bathroom. I fetched a roll of gauze.

The movie thing was bugging me. Was I really that predictable?

"Yes, you bloody well are," Spike said. I flinched, dropping the gauze -- and Spike's hand was already there to catch it.

"Fucking *hell*," I said. "Stop doing that."

"Reading your mind?" He smirked. "I'm not really, you know. Just been down this road before."

"Yeah, well, try to have a little respect for those of us who are taking the trip for the first time." I wound the gauze quickly around his arm and tucked the end in. "So, if we've given up on research and Willow's busy with the spell and Buffy's out saving everyone in Sunnydale from minor injuries, what do you usually do for the rest of the day?"

Spike shrugged, stubbed out his cigarette on a dirty plate. "Depends. There's time to hit L.A. for a spot of fun and be back here by midnight. Or if I'm looking for a quiet day, I might just read a book, like. Or stay in and shag you."

He was looking at me sideways when he said that last bit, and I tried not to give him the satisfaction of visibly choking. I knew he just wanted to get a rise out of me, and Christ, Spike had known how to press my buttons *before* he'd spent eighty years repeating the same day with me over and over. "Yeah right," I said. "Not in *eight hundred* years, Spike."

He smirked. "Oh, but I *have*. Hundreds of times. We're like a pair of old marrieds, Harris, except without the not-tonight-honey-I-have-a-headache. I could have you over this table naked and willing in five minutes if I wanted to."

"No fucking way, Spike." I wasn't even that mad, because whatever, I knew he was just messing with

me. Because I never would have, no way, unless -- oh *fuck*.

I subtly eased myself back from the table, and thought about escape routes. The external fire escape would be better than the apartment's front door -- better to get into sunlight immediately.

Spike was looking down at the table, not at me. "Harris, listen," he said. "You are safe. I would never, ever force you. If you want to go get yourself a stake, open the drapes and make yourself a sunny patch, go ahead. I won't move from this spot until you tell me I can."

He was doing it again, leaping ahead and responding to what I'd thought, not what I'd said. Except this time he hadn't answered my real question, so I asked it out loud. "The chip," I said. "Does it still work?"

"No." He raised his eyes. "No, it doesn't."

I hadn't really expected him to tell me. I mean, why

would he tell me? Wouldn't that be a pretty useful secret to keep to himself? I stared at him for a moment. He was sitting still, like he'd promised, hands spread flat in plain sight on the table.

He was a vampire. He could leap up and snap my neck before I even had time to yelp.

I went and got a stake, and opened the curtains. The light fell a few feet short of Spike.

"How did you turn it off?" I asked. I was holding the stake in front of me. Like that'd do any good if he decided to lunge for me. Maybe I should go get my crossbow. Was it in my bedroom, or had I left it at Buffy's house?

"Didn't. It wore out. Long, long time ago. Started zapping me at random, nearly fucking killed me with the pain, and then it just stopped. Since then, no chip."

"The only way you could know it doesn't work is if you've hurt people since then," I pointed out.

He rolled his eyes. "Never had to hurt people *much* to set it off. Come over here, I'll pinch your bum and you'll see."

"A world of no. Why'd you tell me?"

"Better to get these things in the open. I'm not exactly the man you remember, Harris."

"Yeah, funny, I don't remember you being a man at all."

He flinched, just a little. I wondered if I'd hurt his feelings. Was that even possible?

"And as long as we're on the topic of things that are or are not working properly inside my head, you might as well know -- I *am* in my right mind, now," he said. Which was not exactly a response to the last thing I'd said. Maybe I *had* hurt his feelings.

"Didn't look like it this morning," I said.

He shrugged. "I just wanted to get you out the door without letting on yet about the time loop. Buy myself some peace and quiet."

"Still, sanity? You being in possession of it? Not the kind of thing I'm just going to take your word for."

"I was a right mess when this all got started," he said. "The new soul wasn't sitting too easy, and there was something else. A sort of possession. Something evil hitch-hiking in my brain. Don't worry, it's all sorted now."

I frowned. "I gotta say, Spike, I'm not finding this conversation completely reassuring. What kind of evil hitch-hiker are we talking about here?"

His gaze wandered along the wall behind me. He was looking at the open curtains. "Rather wait and tell you tomorrow, if tomorrow ever comes," he said. "It gets dead boring, telling the same story again and again."

I noticed I'd let my stake-arm drop; the shock of a

chip-less Spike had already worn off. I wasn't really feeling threatened. I tucked the stake into the back of my belt and sat down again, but across the table from Spike. "I'm not bored," I said.

"Well, obviously." He sighed. "Could we just skip ahead to the part where you offer to crack open a couple of beers? You always offer me beer after I explain the bit about the First Evil. I promise I'll tell you the bloody story tomorrow."

"Wait, the First Evil? The same First Evil that tried to kill Angel at Christmas that one time?"

"Tomorrow," he said. Firmly.

Oh, what the hell. I went and got the beers.

Spike popped the cap off his with his bare hands. Show-off. I used the edge of the table. "So hey," I said. "How about lottery numbers? Outcomes of major sporting events?"

"Really only worth it if I *wasn't* about to repeat this

day another ten thousand times," Spike said, and took a long drink. And grimaced. "Bloody awful American beer."

"If you don't like it, the liquor store's just down the road." I leaned back in my chair. "I'll even lend you a blanket."

"Nah, not worth the risk of combustion." He took another drink, wrinkling his nose. "I've never managed that trip without getting singed."

"Then shut up and enjoy your horse piss." Giles used to rag on American beer too. I was immune to the insults. Like the British knew anything at all about how things were supposed to taste.

"I was a hundred and fifty years old before I even entered the time loop," Spike said. "If I wanted to learn how to play the sodding piano, I already bloody well would have."

I blinked. "Holy non sequitur, Batman."

Spike looked confused. "Shite, did I just skip ahead? I refuse the blanket, you tell me to enjoy my horse piss, I say let's make the next one a rum and coke, you ask if I've ever seen *Groundhog Day*, I say bloody hell yeah you bring it up every single time, you ask if I ever do anything cool like Bill Murray learning how to play the piano and talk to that bird, I say--"

"Right, that's where I came in," I interrupted him. "Um, Spike, three-quarters of that conversation never actually happened."

"Fuck," he said, and went looking for the bottom of his beer bottle. Found it in one try, too -- vampires don't have to stop and breathe.

"So, wait, do you have like a script for this entire conversation in your head?"

He rolled his eyes. "Obviously."

This really took some getting used to.

I could see how it would kinda suck from Spike's point of view. Like when you want to watch TV and there's nothing on but reruns of shows you've already seen. Boring ones.

"So how does it end?" I asked.

"Any way I want it to." He set down his empty bottle and smiled at me -- not like the kind of smile a guy gives another guy.

Was that innuendo? God damn it, he was making innuendo at me again. "Fuck off Spike, I'm not going to have sex with you."

He snorted. "You say that every time."

I pushed my chair back from the table, putting myself square in a sunbeam. Better safe than sorry. "You lay a hand on me, Spike, you fucking lose it."

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, pet." He was still smiling. He looked -- Christ, he looked like he thought this was *funny*. "Thing is, you're the one

lays a hand on *me*, generally."

"The problem with this crazy story of yours, Spike, is that I'm not the one trapped in an endless time loop getting so bored I'd boink a *goat* for a little excitement." Wait, had I just implicitly compared having sex with me to having sex with a goat? Crap. He was laughing at me. Moving right along. "I don't like you, I don't find you attractive, I'm not gay, and I'm only even staying in the same *room* with you because somebody's got to keep an eye on you till midnight."

Spike held up three fingers, tilted his head to the side. Looked at me. "One. You're not exactly queer, but you *are* curious. Have been ever since middle school. You wanted to kiss Jesse, but then he died. You nearly told Larry about it one time, but you chickened out, and then *he* died."

A shiver went down my spine. My mouth was suddenly dry, and my heart was pounding. Nobody knew that stuff. *Nobody*.

Why would I have told Spike that stuff?

"Two," he said. "No consequences. You can experiment, try whatever you want -- and after midnight it's all gone. Like it never happened. Bloody hell, *you* won't even remember."

"But you will."

"Three. Nothing to lose. We've already shagged hundreds of times, so it's far too late to worry about your virtue and whatnot." He closed his fist, touched it to his lips, raised an eyebrow at me.

"Well?"

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

So help me God, it almost made sense when he put it like that. Not in an I-want-to-jump-Spike's-bones-right-now kind of way, but I could almost believe that some alternate version of me had, at some point, decided to try fucking Spike. Just to see what it was like.

"You're thinking about it," he said. Smug bastard.

"I am not. And since when are *you* gay, anyway?"

"I'm not. Obviously. Don't tell me you've never heard of the Kinsey Scale and whatnot. Honestly, Harris, in *this* day and age..."

I had no idea what the Kinsey Scale was, but I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of asking. Not when he was clearly mocking me again. And this coming from a guy from the Victorian Era. "The more important point here, Spike, is that I would never ever have sex with *you*. If I wanted to use my free day to experiment, I'd find somebody else to do it with."

"Oh, you have done," he assured me. "Plenty of times. It's all right, we have an open relationship."

"We don't have a relationship. Having sex is not a relationship."

He grinned. "It is if you do it often enough."

He was talking circles around me. Fuck.

I was seized with a nearly frantic urge to throw him off balance -- to do something he wouldn't expect.

He wouldn't expect me to crawl up over the table and grab his collar and mash my lips against his.

And he certainly wouldn't expect me to follow that up by punching his smirking vampire mouth.

Except, from the lazy way he blocked my fist, apparently he *had* expected it.

"You're bloody dangerous with a little drink in you, Harris," he said mildly, looking up at me, still holding my fist in his cupped hand.

I felt ashamed and ridiculous, kneeling on the table in front of him. "You made me do that," I accused him.

"Well no," he said. "But I did let it happen, didn't I?"

I had to get off the table. Get out of the room.  
Regroup. Straighten my head out.

"Do not fucking move," I said to him, and went and locked myself in the bathroom.

I turned on the cold water tap full force and splashed myself in the face a few times. Christ, why did I let Spike get under my skin like that? Why did I *kiss* him? I'd wanted to freak him out but *that* obviously hadn't worked. Fucking hell. I wondered how many times I'd done exactly the same thing. How many times he'd caught my fist and scolded me.

Like he had any fucking moral authority at all.

I walked back out into the main room. Spike was still sitting at the table. The sunbeam was getting dangerously close to him. "You caught me off guard the first time," he said. "Gave me a split lip and all."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

He shrugged. "Dunno, but you always ask."

"What's the point of all this, Spike? If you know exactly what's going to happen, everything I'm going to say and do, why are you going along with it?"

"Beats watching the telly."

I looked at him. He looked back at me. I went and got two more beers.

"Cheers," he said when I slid the bottle across the table to him.

"I should just leave," I said.

"Go ahead," he said.

"What if you decided to skip town, though?"

"I won't. I've been on this job for eighty bloody

years, Harris. I'm not going to stop now."

"Why not? You're obviously bored to death."

"Already dead." He took a drink of beer.

"Oh come on, you know what I mean."

He scowled into his bottle. "I do actually have a conscience, Harris, whatever you might think. Came free with the soul. And I've seen what happens when the Hellmouth opens, and it is not fucking pretty." He put the bottle down again, carefully to the side of the sunbeam which had by now crept right across the table and was threatening to spill over the edge.

"Hey you might want to get out of the way of Mister Golden Sun there," I mentioned, since Spike was showing no particular inclination to move out of the sunbeam's path before he turned into a messy pile of dust. He probably had the timing down to a fine art, but I wasn't interested in breaking out the fire extinguisher.

"Right," he nodded. "Well you see, I did promise to stay put until you told me otherwise."

"Um, what?"

"To assuage your fears about what the big bad vampire might do to you now that his leash is broken. I said I wouldn't move until you gave the word, and here I sit." He played the beer bottle along the edge of the sunbeam, watching the sparkles. "Wouldn't mind if you went and shut the drapes, though."

It was another mind game. Obviously. But I wasn't sure what he thought he was going to get out of it. "So if I don't say 'green light,' you'll just sit there and let yourself burn?"

Spike waved his fingers through the sunbeam and jerked them back quickly. There was a faint trace of smoke. "Maybe. But you won't let me."

"I haven't *yet*." Emphasis on the yet. As in, things

could change this time around, Mr. Know-it-all Vampire.

He smiled, took a sip of his beer. "I know you better than you know yourself, Alexander Lavelle Harris."

"Not if you think I care if you self-immolate." Except of course if he *did* dust himself, then somebody would have to take over the job of repeating the day and shuffling blocks in the Detonator. Me, probably.

Well, I could always go back in time and save Spike.

Yeah, like *that* wouldn't be awkward.

I opened my mouth to tell him to just go ahead and move to a shady corner, but then I saw that he'd put down the beer bottle and let his hand fall open in the sunbeam. He was watching it, watching the smoke rise from the palm of his hand.

"Spike? Spike!" I'd seen vampires burn before; they go up like tinder. "Spike, stop it!" He ignored me. I

ran around the table and grabbed his shoulders and yanked him away from the sun, toppling his chair and dumping him to the floor in the process. "Jesus Christ, Spike, what was that about?"

He curled up on the floor, laughing like he'd just gotten off a rollercoaster.

I left him and went and pulled all the curtains shut. The place wasn't dark when I was done, but it was dimmed down enough for basic vampire preservation.

Then I went back and crouched down a few feet away from Spike. He'd mostly stopped laughing. "Are you done being crazy yet?" I asked. I felt a little shaky, but I couldn't hear it in my voice.

"I'm not crazy. Told you, Harris, I got that sorted years ago."

"Crazy is as crazy does, as my great aunt Phyllis used to say. Right up until they put her in the Alzheimer's ward. Spike, you were about two point

five seconds from vampire flamb?"

"Wasn't in any danger." He sat up, cradling his hand. "You always save me."

"Always? There is no fucking *always*, Spike! As far as I'm concerned this day has only happened *once*, there was no dress rehearsal, I'm making it up as I go along, and what if I hadn't got around the fucking table in time?!"

He shook his head. His shoulders were shaking a little too, and I couldn't quite tell if he was about to start laughing again or maybe crying. He wasn't looking at me. "It's always the first time for *you*, Harris. That's the whole bloody point."

"And by the way, I'm *still* not going to have sex with you."

He snorted. So, laughing then. Definitely preferable to crying. "We never shag on the days I go and burn myself. Total mood-killer, that is."

"There never was a *mood*, Spike!" Fucking hell was I ever tired of him knowing everything that was going to happen, everything that I could possibly do.

So I kissed him again. Hard.

I wasn't turned on, and I was betting that he wasn't either. I just had to do *something* he wouldn't expect.

And okay yeah, I was a little curious. And there weren't going to be any consequences. And I had nothing to lose.

It was about as violent as the first time I'd kissed him, except I didn't pull back a moment later to punch him. I'd never kissed Anya like this, or Cordelia. Maybe Faith.

I knew he could throw me off, but I was pretty sure he wasn't going to. Not the way he'd been teasing me all afternoon since the girls left.

And suddenly I realized I *was* turned on, I was so

fucking hard I was aching with it. That was fast.

We were on the floor beside my table. The blood was rushing in my ears. "Okay, you know what? You win, Spike. I want to fuck you now. We are going to have sex right here on the floor and then you're going to tell me that you saw it coming a mile away and we've done it a thousand times already and I don't *care*." My hands were already fumbling with my belt buckle.

"No," he said.

I couldn't process the word at first. It rattled around in my head, a nonsense syllable, and I could hear myself breathing and my belt was undone and -- *No means no*, some helpful inner voice reminded me, a phrase like ice water. I backed off. "What do you mean, *no*?"

"Phone," he said. And then the phone rang. "It's Red," he added helpfully.

I ran for the phone, the ends of my belt flapping

against my legs. "Hello?"

"Hi Xander!" It was Willow. Of course. "How are you doing?"

"Oh, well, you know. We're hanging out." I saw Spike raising an eyebrow at me. I tucked the phone between my ear and shoulder and did up my belt, and then went into my bedroom and shut the door.

Jesus Christ. I couldn't believe I'd just about had sex with Spike. He was making *me* crazy.

"So, I was working on the spell and I hit a snag," Willow said. "It calls for sand from an hourglass but I don't have an hourglass. So I thought I'd substitute the bits from a smashed-up clock. But then I thought, wait, what if the physical properties of the sand are more important than the metaphysical? So maybe I should just use beach sand. But *then* I thought that obviously the spell must've worked the first time I tried it, so probably my first impulse was right. But then I thought, what if I went with my second impulse the first time? And then I thought, I

probably didn't overthink it like this the first time. So finally I decided I'd better call and ask Spike if he knows what I did before."

I'd barely caught half of what she said. Something about smashing a clock. I was about to ask her to repeat herself when Spike opened my door and said,

"Tell her to mix the clock innards in with the beach sand."

Then he shut the door again.

"Fuck," I said.

"What?" Willow said.

"Mix them both together, Spike says. And by the way you asking the question was superfluous. He could've told you anyway."

"Gives you a bit of a new perspective on the free will versus determinism debate, doesn't it," Willow

mused.

"Um, probably. Look, Will, we have a problem."

"What?"

"I think Spike's losing it. He's gone around the loop so many times he's going loopy." I quickly described how he'd burned himself in the sunbeam. I left out the bits about him trying to talk me into having sex with him.

"Uh oh," Willow said. "Well, I mean, I guess it's natural that he'd be getting pretty bored."

"He's a danger to himself. Do you think we could, like, give him a vacation or something? Maybe send somebody else around the time loop a few times?"

It wouldn't be so bad repeating the day for a week or so, I figured. It wouldn't take too big a bite out of my life. And I'd finally enter the day with a good idea of what was going on.

"It doesn't really work like that," Willow said. "I mean, remember from Buffy's perspective, she's been stuck going around the loop for a couple of weeks -- even though from Spike's perspective, he took over from her over eighty years ago."

I sighed. "Time travel makes my head hurt."

"Not as much as it's going to make *my* head hurt when I do this spell!" Willow said. She was clearly trying for cheerfully-bitching but there was a brittle edge to her voice. I guessed it was some pretty serious magicks she was prepping over there.

"Okay, look," she said, "you'll just have to find a way to make him un-bored. Entertain him. Maybe take him to the zoo?"

"The zoo." Ah, Willow. "Well, hyena possession is always entertaining..."

"You'll think of something!" she said. "I've got to get back to work on the spell."

"Right," I said. "Good luck."

Entertain him. Right.

Spike was in my bathroom with the door open, sitting on the closed toilet, trying to use his teeth to wrap a bandage around his injured left hand.

"I'll do it," I said. He'd made a mess of the wrapping, so I undid it and started fresh. The palm of his hand was red and blistered, blackened in places. It didn't smell like burnt flesh, though; it smelled like cold ashes. "That looks like it hurts," I said.

"Does."

"Want something for the pain?"

He nodded in the direction of the sink, and I saw that an aspirin bottle was lying open on its side, empty. "Helped myself," he said.

"So how many hundreds of times have we done this?" I asked, wrapping him up.

"Six."

"Six hundred?"

"No, six times."

"Oh." I paused. Was six times less crazy than six hundred? "Are you, um, do you want to talk about it?"

"No," he said.

Well, that was unambiguous. "Willow thinks I should take you to the zoo," I said.

"Bit sunny, that," he said.

"Well, have we ever *gone* to the zoo?" I was warming up to the idea, actually. At this point, anything that Spike hadn't done ten thousand times already was looking like a win. "You can get around with a blanket, right? There's indoor parking, and the pavilions..."

"We've been to the sodding zoo," he interrupted me. "You show me the hyena environment and tell me about the zookeeper's spell. Then we shag in the broom closet."

"We do not," I said, almost reflexively. And then, "Really? Every time?"

"Well, whenever we go to the zoo it's because you've had the conversation with Red where you tell her I'm getting dangerously bored. Which means I've definitely been trying to talk you into shagging."

"It's like a Choose Your Own Adventure book!" I realized suddenly. "I mean, you get to the end of the page and it's all 'If you want to talk to the troll, go to page 5. If you want to fight the troll, go to page 10.' Except you've already read the whole book so you know what's going to happen either way -- but you still get to choose."

"Bit like that, yeah."

"Do I make that analogy every time?"

"No," he said. "But this wasn't the first time. And if Dawn's around when you make it, it's a unicorn instead of a troll."

"Huh. Weird."

Spike stood up and rubbed his neck with his uninjured hand. "Not really. The Bit likes unicorns. Just goes to show she's never met one."

I didn't rise to the bait. I'd never really gotten over Anya telling us the truth about Santa Claus. "But seriously, that's the key, isn't it? Anything I suggest, I've probably already come up with a thousand times. But *you* can decide to do something new."

Spike shrugged. "L.A. is better for that. Sunnydale's bloody well played out."

"So let's go to L.A."

"Too late in the day."

"Ever consider that maybe the reason you're getting so bored here is because you're *boring*?"

Spike flipped me a rude two-fingered gesture.

"It's in your hands, Spike!" I insisted. "Think of something fun for us to do."

"Sod off," he said. "In fact, sod all of this. I'm going to sleep for the rest of the day, like a *normal* bloody vampire. Wake me up for my appointment with Red."

So Spike retreated to his cot in the closet, and I spent the rest of the afternoon having a perfectly good time watching basketball on TSN and not worrying about Spike spoiling the ending for me.

And then after a supper of leftover pizza, I found myself gingerly opening the closet door and peeking in.

It had been years since I'd watched Spike sleep --

not since the basement days.

A sleeping vampire looks exactly like a dead guy, except for when he doesn't. Sometimes Spike would breathe in his sleep, twitch, snore. Other times, like now, he'd just lie there like a good-looking corpse.

Damn him and his innuendo and his finely-chiseled cheekbones. I felt myself starting to get hard again just remembering how I'd attacked him with that kiss, how I'd wanted to fuck him. It was disgusting. This was *Spike*, for fuck's sake.

He was lying sprawled on his back, his injured left arm curled against his chest, his right hand dangling over the edge of the cot. Black jeans, red t-shirt; standard Spike. Noticing the bulge in the denim at his crotch, I felt suddenly warmer, and I averted my gaze pretty quickly. Sort of quickly. Okay, not quickly enough.

Well, of course I was curious. Apparently alternate-me, in earlier versions of this day, had been a hell of a lot more than curious.

Assuming Spike wasn't lying through his teeth, which was not necessarily a safe assumption.

What had it been like, having sex with Spike? It was kind of annoying, actually, to think that maybe I'd *done* it but I'd never be able to remember it. Talk about pointless.

I bet it was rough. Not like play-spanking with Anya -- more like near-strangulation with Faith.

Vampire. No chip. Dangerous. I probably would've tied him up first. He would've let me, I bet he was into the kinky stuff. I'd have made him take his clothes off, and then I'd have tied him to -- Christ, what in this apartment was good for tying somebody to? The table. Face-down on the table, his wrists tied to its legs. His legs spread wide.

Oh God I wanted to touch myself. I let out a shuddery breath. Spike cracked his eyes open.

"Bit pervy, watching a bloke sleep," he said.

"Yiiiiiei!" I said, or something along those lines, while jumping out of my skin and smashing the back of my skull against the doorframe.

"Don't panic, Harris," he said, sitting up with a smirk on his face. "Nothing you haven't done before."

"I-I was just wondering if you were okay," I stuttered, feeling my neck flushing.

In retrospect, something from the oeuvre of *Fuck off and die*, followed immediately by slamming the closet door behind me, probably would have gone further towards hiding the fact that I'd just been fantasizing about having sex with him.

Spike rolled his eyes. "Harris, I can see your boner."

My hands immediately leapt to cover my crotch, a reflex I am not proud of. And then I remembered to be pissed off instead of embarrassed. "Well, you're the one who's been talking about having sex with me all afternoon!"

He shrugged, conceding the point like water off a duck's back. "What time is it?" he asked.

"What, you don't know already? Haven't we had this conversation five thousand times already at exactly the same time of night?"

"No." He shifted like he was going to stand up, but didn't. "Bits are new."

I didn't really know what to make of that. "It's about eight o'clock," I said.

He stood up then, and he kissed me.

He didn't move very fast. I could've backed away. I didn't. He cupped his right hand behind my neck and pressed his body hard against mine, and I could feel his cock rubbing against my own through two layers of thick denim. His kiss was lazy, cool. An I-know-you're-not-going-anywhere kind of kiss.

"It's better in your bedroom," he said. "The lube's

there, and your bed's a hell of a lot sturdier than mine is."

"Fuck," I said. "Let's do it."

Halfway through ripping our clothes off in my bedroom, I remembered how I'd wanted to tie him up. "How about we--" I started.

He didn't wait for me to finish. "The table breaks." He dropped his shirt crumpled to the floor. "And it's bloody uncomfortable even before that."

"Oh. Um, never mind then."

Okay, I was pretty sure he wouldn't kill me. And what the hell, the day would reset anyway.

The lights were off -- we hadn't turned them on when we'd entered the room. The streetlight outside my building gave enough light to see by. I knew Spike could see more clearly than I could, but the semi-darkness made me more comfortable anyway.

I was teeter-tottering pretty quickly between lust and embarrassment. It was kind of running together into one feeling: lustbarrassment. Embarralust. I felt very hot, that was for sure. So it was good to be naked.

Spike knew where the lube was. Of course he did. He knelt on the bed in front of me, and said in a sort of husky voice, "I want you inside of me, Xander."

*Xander*, not *Harris*. So we were on a first-name basis now, were we. Well, that was probably for the best. I wasn't going to start calling him William, though.

Oh. He was stroking my cock, giving me a little hand-job in the process of lubing me up. I shuddered and squeezed my fingers into the bedsheet in an effort to not come right *then*, and God it had been a while since I'd last had sex, hadn't it?

He was looking at my face, and I found I had to look away. I didn't want eye contact. What did he think I

was, a chick? I looked at the wall over his head.

His gaze had been disturbingly open. Like he really wanted this, wasn't just doing it to mess with me.

It wasn't like it was the best hand-job I'd ever had, or anything. Anya had definitely given me better ones. In fact the strokes were a little clumsy, fumbling.

Oh. Duh. He was using his right hand, his off hand. Because the left one was burned to hell and bandaged up.

I suddenly found myself having qualms. There was some definite not-in-his-right-mindness going on with Spike. What he'd done earlier was not terribly far off from a suicide attempt. Was I taking advantage of him?

"What's wrong?" Spike asked, his hand hesitating.

"I -- oh fuck Spike, don't make me say this if I've already said it five thousand times."

He shook his head, looking puzzled. Maybe even a little worried. "You haven't. This is new."

"Well then what makes you think something's wrong?"

He tilted his head a little bit to the side. "You went away for a moment there. 'M not used to that."

Okay, that was a little disconcerting. He was too fucking perceptive. "Fuck, Spike. Okay. I was just wondering if you were okay."

He still looked confused. "You said that already. When you woke me up."

"For real, though. I mean, your hand--"

He shrugged. "Hurts some, but it won't get in the way. Plenty I can do with one hand, Harris." He showed me his teeth in a grin, and then went for my neck.

I had a quick flash of *vampire! neck!* panic, and the adrenaline made the sexual charge from his rough sucking kisses that much more intense.

But it wasn't quite enough to make me forget that he hadn't exactly answered my question.

"Spike!" I caught his shoulders, pushed him back to arm's length. "That's not what I meant." At his blank look, I elaborated, "I meant are you," waving my hand in a fluttery motion, "*okay?*"

He blinked. Maybe my elaboration could've been a bit more elaborate. But then he said, in a lower, more sober voice than he'd used before, "Right. Well then, no. What would you bloody well expect? I've been repeating this day for eighty years, and none of you gets a day older. I know you better than your bloody mother does, and you still think of me as the bloke who nearly raped Buffy last May."

"Ah." This was not sexy talk. Fuck. My erection was fading, and I felt uncomfortable being naked. I wished for some sort of instant-dressing

superpower, like Clark Kent in a phone booth. "Well that *is* who you are, Spike."

"You were going to shag me, though."

"Not because I *like* you."

"I've done worse things than that, you know," he said. "Killed people. Thousands of them. I didn't feel like a monster, though, not until that last -- not until I'd hurt someone I didn't want to hurt. So then I went and got a soul and I saw that I'd been a monster the whole time. All those lives I took..." He was still kneeling in front of me, head bowed.

"Spike," I said, but I couldn't think of a follow-up.

The weird thing was, I'd never really wondered if he was *sorry*.

"I nearly raped Buffy once," I said.

He looked up sharply. Was it possible I'd surprised him? Fuck, I didn't know what I was doing, what I

was saying. I was naked on my bed with Spike.

"This is part of the hyena story," I said. "Didn't I ever tell you before?"

He shook his head the tiniest bit.

"Well, first time for everything. *Nearly* is too strong a word, maybe. She could've thrown me off with both hands tied behind her back. The hyena made me a lot meaner, but it didn't make me much stronger. The thing is though, I wanted to. I would've done it if I could have." I'd never told this to anyone before. The girls still thought I didn't remember anything that happened while I was possessed. "I've never really thought about it before, but I guess that hyena possession is a little bit like getting vamped." I paused. He wasn't saying anything, just looking at me. "Yeah, so," I finished, "I guess I'm just saying, I can relate to the monster thing. A bit."

"You're full of surprises, Harris," he said very quietly. "Even after all this time."

"Hey," I said. It was time to beat a hasty retreat from all this heavy stuff. "Did I ever tell you about the time I stopped a bunch of zombies from blowing up Sunnydale High?"

He made a faint smile. "Hells yeah," he said. "Dozens of times."

"What about the time I saved the world by talking?"

"Hundreds of times."

"Okay, how about the time I nearly got laid by a hot substitute teacher who turned out to be a giant Praying Mantis?"

"Many, many times."

"All right then. I guess we should get dressed, so--"

He put a finger lightly over my lips. His left hand. I shut up.

"Just getting started, we were," he said. "If you still want to..."

I wasn't sure. Not after all this heart-to-heart stuff. It made it harder to think of fucking Spike as just a dirty little experiment with no consequences.

On the other hand, he was naked in front of me, all tight smooth flesh rippling with muscle, half-hard cock resting against his thigh. He wanted me. And I still wanted to know what it would be like.

"Yeah," I said.

This time, we didn't get off track with phone calls or qualms-having or frighteningly intimate confessions. This time, I let Spike climb into my lap and settle himself on my cock. I let him ride me, rocking slowly at first with his head nestled against my neck, biting me gently with blunt human teeth. I leaned back on my hands, closed my eyes, didn't care how exposed I was.

He came first, shuddering and gasping, his grip on

my shoulders gone suddenly painfully tight. Then I could feel his semen on my belly, cool and sticky.

"My turn," I said.

I pushed him down so he was lying on his back in front of me, his hips canted up. I got to my knees, planted my hands on either side of his shoulders, my cock still buried inside of him.

He was tighter than Anya, and much, much cooler. It was strange, but not unpleasant. Plenty pleasant, in fact, pleasantly pleasurable. I started off slow like him, lazy strokes, but then it just felt so good I had to go faster.

When I came it was pretty fantastic, a long toe-curling surge of awesome. I rolled off Spike and lay beside him with my eyes closed, watching the sparkles behind my eyelids until they finally stopped. I felt loose, languid, satisfied.

*So, you just had sex with a guy, my brain told me. That was kind of fun. Maybe we should do it again*

*someday.*

*Oh by the way, my brain continued, You just screwed Buffy's ex. That's kind of weird, isn't it?*

*Also, my brain added, You owe Anya an apology. Big-time.*

Beside me, Spike sniffled.

I sat up. "Spike? Are you *crying*?"

It was a rhetorical question. Even in the semi-darkness I could see his eyes shining with tears.

I was confused, disconcerted. Fuck. When somebody cries right after you have sex with them, that's bad, right?

Spike got up, swiping the back of his bandaged hand across his eyes. "Sod off Harris," he said, and went to put his jeans on.

"Did I do something wrong?" I'd thought he'd had

fun too. I'd thought we'd had fully-consenting, recreational sex with no strings attached. I was getting a bit dizzy from the emotional rollercoaster. Spike was acting like a girl, and not in a good way.

"It doesn't matter," he snapped, and tugged his t-shirt on over his head. "You won't remember a bloody thing tomorrow, will you?"

"Well that's not *my* fault."

"Never said it was." He stalked out of the room.

I stared at the open doorway behind him for a minute or two, trying to marshal my thoughts into some kind of useful order. Was I supposed to go after him? If it was Anya, she'd want me to follow her.

He wasn't Anya. We weren't in a fucking relationship. I didn't even like him.

Okay, historically I didn't like him. Tonight I wasn't sure. It had been a very confusing day.

I was still sitting naked on the edge of the bed like an idiot when I heard the front door of the apartment open, then slam shut.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

I got to Buffy's house about eleven thirty. Spike was sitting on the front steps alone, smoking.

"Hey," I said.

He looked over at me, but he didn't say anything. The tip of his cigarette glowed momentarily redder.

I felt awkward. I considered sitting down beside him, but settled on just leaning against the post.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "All be over soon. Anyhow, here come the girls."

Buffy and Dawn were coming down the street. Dawn looked tired, with leaves stuck in her hair. She

was holding a kitten against her chest. Buffy was glowing.

"That was the best day *ever!*" she exclaimed when she got close enough. "Oh my God Spike, that list was amazing. I saved everybody. Anybody in peril anywhere in Sunnydale, bam, I was there. In the nick of time. This is what being the Slayer is supposed to be like!"

Willow was already approaching from the other direction, a knapsack slung over her shoulder and the Detonator cradled in her hands. "Hey guys, you're all here! I've got the spell ready."

"Let's get to the high school, then," Spike said, standing up. He ground his cigarette out under the heel of his boot. "Best to watch from across the street so we can see when the roof blows off."

"The whole roof?" Dawn asked, cradling the kitten a bit more protectively.

"Nah, just bits of it."

The whole way to the school, Buffy regaled us with stories about her awesome day of saving everybody. Dawn chirped in frequently with additional commentary; the kitten was fast asleep in her hands. Whenever I snuck a look at Spike, he was watching Buffy with a sort of indulgent half-smile. I guessed this was one of those bits he got word-for-word every day.

Willow was pale and nervously quiet. I chucked her on the shoulder, trying to be reassuring. "Obviously you must get it right every time," I said.

"Obviously," she echoed weakly.

We stopped across the street from the school, like Spike had suggested.

"So what happens now?" Dawn asked, peering over at the darkened building.

Spike glanced at the sky, as though he could tell time by the stars. Well, he probably could. "In a

minute or so, the box will glow bright white," he said. "It'll get all hot, like, and make a sort of popping sound."

"Hot as in *ow, ow, my poor fingers*," Buffy interjected. "Just leave it on the ground, Will."

"Then we'll hear a rumbling from inside the school," Spike went on, "followed by a pretty light show with a bit of complimentary brimstone. That'd be a good time for you to make with the pouring and the chanting, Red."

"Right," Willow said, opening her knapsack. "I've got everything ready."

A blue car drove by.

"Here we go, then," Spike said, and we all looked down at the Detonator.

Which immediately proceeded to fail to do any of the things Spike had described.

"That's funny," he said after a moment.

"It should be doing it by now," Buffy said. She looked over at the school, back down at the box.

"Oh my God. It's not going to do it! It's over!" She flung her arms around Willow and lifted her off the ground in a giant hug. "It's *over*! You did it!"

"I didn't do anything," Willow protested breathlessly.

"Ah, paradox," I said numbly. "The scourge of time travelers everywhere."

Willow wasn't going to do the spell. The day wasn't going to reset. I couldn't look at Spike.

"Lucky for you, Red," Spike said somewhere off to my left. "Considering how the spell always ends."

"What do you mean?" Willow asked.

"You die," Buffy said, hugging her again. She sounded like she was crying a little. "It kills you."

Every day for the past two weeks I've watched you die."

"Doesn't matter now," Spike said. "Not gonna happen, is it?"

I stared at him. "You didn't say anything. How could you not say anything?"

"Red told me not to," he said. "She didn't want to know."

"Me too," Buffy added. "Oh God Will, I'm so sorry. Every night I've had to watch it rip you apart...." She dissolved into tears.

So I guessed that asking to repeat the day one last time was out of the question.

I was just going to have to live with the consequences.

I looked at Spike again and saw that this time, he was looking at me. I couldn't begin to guess what he

was thinking, though.

"Let's go home," I said.

### **Monday: Epilogue**

Early Monday morning, I listened to the radio while I ate my Corn Puffs.

*...the Emergency Room at the Sunnydale Hospital reports a twenty percent reduction from normal in minor injuries, a fifty percent reduction in major injuries, and zero, I repeat, zero mysterious deaths yesterday. They're calling it the Sunday Miracle. And now, Nickelback with "How You Remind Me" kicking off thirty minutes commercial free. You're listening to KTHX Sunnydale. Be careful out there.*

Spike emerged from his closet, looking ruffled and

sleepy. He stopped when he saw me, an expression of sheer confusion on his face. "What the hell are you doing up already?" he asked.

"Um, breakfast?" I gestured at my bowl of rapidly sogging cereal. "I've got to be at the job site at 7 a.m. sharp."

"Job site," he repeated dumbly. "That's right. You used to, what's it, work in construction, yeah?" He frowned at my cereal. "I was going to make eggs and bacon."

"I'm not stopping you," I said. "But I've got to be out the door in ten minutes."

"No point then, is there?" he said. "Not like I was gonna eat them."

I finished my breakfast, trying to ignore the way Spike was wandering listlessly around my kitchen.

I wondered if I should say something about yesterday. I really didn't want to. Pretending it had

never happened sounded a whole lot easier.

"When will you be home, then?" he asked.

"Um, late. I'll probably stop by Buffy's first."

"Right then," Spike said, and randomly opened and shut a few cupboards.

He was giving off a really weird vibe. I mean, he wasn't acting crazy, exactly, not like before. But there was something really ... *off* about him.

"Maybe I should move out," he said. "Clean out the old crypt, or maybe get a proper flat of my own."

"Um, yeah." I got up to put my dishes in the sink.

"That sounds like a good idea."

"We could both use some space," he said. "Time to get things sorted."

There was something about this conversation...

"Spike," I said, "Are you breaking up with me?"

"Er," he said.

"You can't do that," I said. "It implies we were together in the first place."

He shut another cupboard door so hard the plywood cracked. We both stood and looked at it for a moment.

"Sorry," he said. "I forgot. Not gonna fix itself, is it? Everything stays broken now."

Somehow, this was not going well.

I was going to be late for work. Fuck.

Spike turned and walked away. Headed for the front door.

I caught up and grabbed his arm just as he reached for the doorknob. "Spike, hold on! Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Dunno, out. Sod off," he said, going very still, very tight. He didn't shake me off, though I knew he could throw me clear across the room if he wanted to. No chip.

"It's daylight out there."

"Long shadows. Sun's barely up."

He was still gripping the doorknob with his left hand, the injured one. I put my own hand over it.

"Not such a good idea, I'm thinking. Considering your recent track record with sunbeams." I was worried about him. It was a novel sensation.

Somewhere along the way yesterday, I'd started to think of him as a person. "Maybe I should call one of the girls to stay with you."

He kind of shuddered a little. "Step back and let me go, Xander, before I hurt you," he said without looking at me.

I didn't back down. "Whatever, like I haven't been knocked on my ass by a vampire before. Just don't

go outside. We can talk."

"About what? The Detonator's disarmed. Sunnydale is safe. You don't need me anymore."

"What happened yesterday. Between us."

"Yesterday," he repeated, his voice shaking. "You have no bloody idea."

"Yeah, I'm kind of getting that." I tugged him away from the door, and this time he didn't resist.

"Beer?" I suggested.

So I'd be late for work. Or possibly call in sick. Not like they were gonna fire me.

"Sod that," he said, and made straight for the rum.

He didn't offer to share until he was about three quarters done. Then he handed me the bottle, I took one polite swallow and handed it back, and he polished it off.

"Couldn't tell you how many times I've seen the bottom of this bloody bottle," he said thoughtfully, holding it up empty in front of himself. "Thousands. Tens of thousands, more likely."

We were sitting at opposite ends of the couch. I was pretending not to notice the tears drying on his cheeks. "Well, say your goodbyes," I said. "Now it goes in Mr. Recycling Bin."

I was trying to figure out how to bring the conversation around to *Can I go to work now without you taking a walk in the sunshine?*

Spike seemed steadier with a quart of rum in him. "I meant it," he said, "about moving out. I don't belong here anymore."

"Um." I cleared my throat. "You don't have to. Not right away. I mean, from my point of view, you haven't even been here a week."

"Well, that's the whole problem, innit." Spike

slumped back, pressing the empty bottle against his forehead. "Been eighty years, for me."

I was starting to get a sense of the time loop from Spike's perspective. He'd been living with me for eighty years.

It kinda gave me goosebumps, thinking of it that way. That was nearly as long as he'd been with *Drusilla*.

"I guess there are a lot of yesterdays I don't remember," I said. "I'm sorry."

He gave me a funny look. "Not your bloody fault, Harris."

"The yesterday I *do* remember -- it changes things. I mean, I don't really know what, or how -- fuck, Spike, I haven't had a lot of time to think about it yet. It just sort of happened, and I expected it to unhappen, and then it didn't."

I took a deep breath. I wasn't sure if where I was

going with this was a good idea or not. But the look on Spike's face was giving me these fluttery feelings in my belly. The kind I used to get with Cordy when we went looking for hidden places to make out.

"Maybe you could tell me about the missing yesterdays," I said. "Maybe we could go from there."

He nodded slowly. "That's a lot of yesterdays," he said.

"Yeah, well," I said. "I got time."

**The End**