

P.S. I Love You
By Scribblesinink

Emily cupped a mug of hot tea in both her hands, glaring over its rim at the box that sat in the middle of her kitchen table. Slightly smaller than a shoebox, it was made of white cardboard and printed with the red letters and symbols of the American Red Cross. One of Beck's patrols had delivered it to City Hall early that morning, along with a batch of other mail; they said it'd all been handed them by some of Hoffman's men under a flag of truce.

Nobody had seemed entirely sure what to make of the delivery, but since most of the mail looked to be private letters, although there was some other Red Cross correspondence, Gray had ordered it distributed among the addressees. The first Emily had known of it was when Jimmy had startled her by dropping by to hand-deliver this particular box to her.

She considered the innocent-looking box some more. Someone had sliced through the sticky tape that had originally held the lid shut, and then taped it closed again, the fresh tape half-obscuring her name and address printed on the envelope glued on top of the box. Jimmy had assured her that that was how it'd arrived at City Hall. Considering what was supposed to be in the box, the reassurance didn't make her feel much better.

She'd read the accompanying letter that had been in the envelope, of course, although she hadn't the heart yet to peruse the box's contents. *Regret to inform you.... Body recovered.... No surviving relatives could be contacted.... Take delivery of Mr. Hammond's personal effects....*

Recalling the impersonal message, Emily shivered, despite the heat that permeated her palms through the mug's porcelain, or the humid summer air that hung in the kitchen.

Deep down, she'd known all along, hadn't she? Or strongly suspected, at least. That Roger's chances of surviving on his own, on those roads, in the middle of winter, were infinitesimal, Jake slipping him a gun right before he left notwithstanding. It was that supposition, bordering on certainty, that had stopped her from feeling any guilt when she'd gotten back together with Jake and moved in with him at his parents' house, abandoning her own place at The Pines.

She turned away to get herself more tea, uttering a rueful noise in the back of her throat. That had worked out just great, too, hadn't it? 'Cause a few months later, here she was, back in the kitchen she and Roger had once shared, back in the house they'd hoped to make their home. While his last mementos waited for her attention in a cardboard box on

the table.

And she didn't even have the moxie to look at them....

Growling in disgust at herself, she slammed the mug of freshly poured tea back down on the counter, dragged open a drawer and found a knife. Before she could reconsider, she cut the tape and, putting the knife down, folded back the flaps.

She drew in a sharp breath. She wasn't sure what she'd expected the box to contain, but discovering it held nothing but a small, battered notebook and a leather wallet seemed a little anticlimactic. There'd been no mistake, though: she recognized the wallet right away. She'd given it Roger as a present the Christmas before the bombs. The Christmas they'd spent in New York City, window-shopping on Fifth Avenue and visiting the Rockefeller Center to gawk at the tree and watch the skaters twirl on the rink....

Emily shook off the memories and lifted the wallet from the box. It was thin, holding nothing but Roger's driver's license, an old photo of her—God, she'd been so young then!—and a couple of tattered business cards from a Chicago firm. Probably from the interview he'd had, she thought, the day of the bombs. Briefly, she pondered what would've happened if he hadn't gone to Chicago that day.... Or if they hadn't had that fight, and she'd gone with him.... She pushed the thought away, knowing the whatifs would drive her crazy. And it didn't matter any longer, anyway. Roger was dead, and she was alone. Probably bound to turn into an old spinster, she thought bitterly. Because hanging out with Chavez was fun, and the sex was great, but he wasn't a keeper, she'd known that from the beginning.

She put the wallet aside and picked up the notebook, idly wondering what had possessed Roger to bring it along on his exile. She flipped through it, her vision blurred by unbidden tears that formed at the sight of his handwriting. Blinking away the tears, she saw the first half of the notebook was full, the pages crammed with Roger's neat, firm script.

Catching her name halfway down one of the early pages, her mouth went dry, and her hands started to shake.

My sweet Emily,

It's only been a few hours, and I already miss you more than I can say. I thought I knew what to expect, but it's hard, much harder than before. I guess it's because I'm walking away from you, not to you....

Love you, R.

There was a lump in her throat, and the sultry summer air seemed almost too thick to

drag past it into her lungs. These notes, they weren't random scribbles. They were letters. Letters addressed to her.

With clumsy fingers, unwilling to read more, but incapable of putting the book down, she turned to the next page.

Going to New Bern was a mistake. Nearly got shot for my troubles, never even got to see Heather or Eric Green. Something's very wrong here: that town's locked up tighter than a Chicago bank vault. Anyway, aiming for Black Jack now. Maybe I can catch a ride home from there. Or maybe I'll make for one of the FEMA camps. I know I can be useful there. Miss you, R.

Emily pulled in another shuddering breath, half-sob, half-laugh. Roger always did have a knack for understatements. She flipped through the rest of the notebook, scanning entries here and there. They were dated various days in January and early February, and mostly short notes where Roger described his journey: the time he'd spooked a deer, or had to hide in a ditch from a road gang; the snow storm that had kept him cooped up in an empty hunting hut for three days, half-freezing to death. He off-handedly mentioned running out of the canned food Jessica and the others had gotten him. Tears formed in Emily's eyes as she read his words, and trickled down her face. She wasn't aware of them as she browsed on through the notebook until she reached the last entry: a few quickly penciled lines on an otherwise empty page.

Still 10 miles to the nearest camp. There's another storm brewing, and it's so cold I can hardly hold the pencil to write. Haven't eaten in a week. And I'm so tired.... I'm sorry, babe, I don't think I'm gonna make it. I wish it were different.... I want you to know: I don't regret what I did, though. I'd do it again; I couldn't allow Gray to send away my friends, leave them to die on the roads. You understand that, right?

The writing was a little smudged there, as if the page had gotten wet. Emily squinted to decipher the final lines, Roger's last words to her.

I just wish it wasn't you who paid the price. Forgive me. Be good. I love you, Roger.

Emily dropped the notepad onto the table as if the pages burned her fingers. Gasping for air, blood thundering in her ears, she pushed away from the table and stumbled out the back door, into the yard. Only when she was several dozen feet from the house could she draw air again, a deep, wheezing breath. Her heart was thudding in her chest and she felt sick.

God, Roger....

She wrapped her arms around herself, stricken with the guilt that she'd never allowed herself to feel before, but that she was no longer able to keep at bay. Roger had been writing her these little letters, telling her he loved her still, begging for her forgiveness, while she—. She swung her head slowly from side to side.

She'd grieved for a week, and then she'd started the high school again. In City Hall of all places, like nothing bad had ever happened there. She'd helped her father rob and murder, and then, after the New Bern War, had rekindled things with Jake like the intervening years had never happened. Sure, she'd told herself at the time that it was because Jake needed her, after Johnston died. But if she were totally honest with herself, she'd needed him as much as he'd needed her. Maybe more.

Oh, who was she kidding? She'd always needed Jake more than he did her. She could see that now. And Roger.... Roger had died for her.

She sank to her knees in the stiff grass that was yellowing under the hot sun and lack of water, and hid her face in her hands.

She didn't know how long she sat like that. She wasn't really crying... wasn't even thinking any thoughts in particular. Her mind had gone blank, unwilling to deal with the turmoil of emotions that had overwhelmed her on reading Roger's confessions, left on the pages of that old notebook. The sun beat down on her, breaking out sweat on her back and plastering her shirt to her skin, but she didn't notice.

It wasn't until a door slammed shut inside the house that she stirred, lifting her head, sudden panic assaulting her. God, she couldn't face Chavez. Not right now. Not when she was such a mess.

But the voice that called for her wasn't Chavez's. "Miss Sullivan?" Colonel Davies' Texan drawl had grown louder on the last syllable, and she knew he'd entered the kitchen. There was a long pause, before he called again. "Emily?" Concern now colored his tone, and Emily realized with a start that she'd left the letter and the box, and Roger's notebook, open on the kitchen table for anyone to see.

A moment later, before she could think what to do, the colonel appeared at the kitchen door that she'd left hanging open, his tall, thin form filling the frame. "Oh, there you are." His voice held a hint of relief, but concern showed on his weathered face as he walked over to her. "You okay?" He reached down to help her up, supporting her with a strong hand on her elbow.

She shook her head, but she allowed him to help her back to her feet. "Did you—?" Her voice was scratchy, and she cleared her throat. "Did you see...?"

His blue eyes were filled with anxiety as he peered down at her. "I read the letter, if that's what you mean." He guided her back to the kitchen and pulled out a chair for her to sit on. He filled a glass from the jug of boiled water from the well, handing it to her before gently asking, "Who was he?"

"My fiance." Emily gulped down the water gratefully, her throat tight. As Davies lifted a puzzled eyebrow, she added, "We were supposed to get married, but the bombs—" She uttered a sob. It seemed so long ago, but it was less than a year ago that Heather had taken her to Bailey's and gotten her drunk in an attempt to help her forget what day it was.

"Here, now...." The colonel hovered beside her, patting her shoulder awkwardly.

Emily dimly thought he probably wasn't used to dealing with crying women, and she struggled to pull herself together. She took another sip of water. "He was forced to leave Jericho after New Year's. After he shot Gray...."

"Gray *Anderson*?" Davies sounded a little incredulous. "I'll be...." He pulled out another chair and sat himself down, muttering under his breath, "Well, I'm sure he had good reason."

Emily hiccuped a laugh at the last words, although she suspected the remark hadn't been intended for her ears. The wry grimace Davies shot her confirmed her suspicion. "Sorry. That was—."

"No." Emily shook her head, and then surprised herself by adding, "He did." As Davies quirked another bushy eyebrow in question, she found herself pouring out the entire story. How she and Roger had fought, the night before he left for Chicago; how she'd believed he was dead, until the moment she saw him walking up Main Street in a straggle of filthy refugees. How weird and awkward it had been to have him home again, and how he'd stood up for the refugees when Gray wanted to kick them out. And how, in the struggle for Gray's gun, it had gone off, nearly killing Gray, and ensuring Roger's exile from Jericho.

By the end of her tale, she was crying again. Without a word, Davies handed her a handkerchief he'd produced from somewhere. She used it to wipe her eyes and blow her nose. "Anyway," she cleared her throat, "today, that came in the mail." She nodded at the box. "Jimmy says Hoffman let an entire batch of stuff through."

Davies' expression darkened at the mention of Cheyenne's commander. "I know. Damned considerate of him." His tone betrayed he found it anything but considerate, and Emily

gave him a confused look. "There were... other letters," he explained. "Hoffman must've known what was in them. Knew it'd get people upset." He paused a moment, fingers drumming on the table's surface. "Great way to undermine morale."

"Oh." Emily didn't ask who else had gotten mail from the Red Cross; she didn't think she wanted to know. She also hadn't considered it yet, but the colonel's theory would explain why her letter had been dated over a month ago: Hoffman had held on to it until he'd collected enough bad news. She felt a surge of angry determination. If Cheyenne thought they could bring Jericho to its knees that easily, then—.

From down the hall, she heard the front door open and close, cutting her thoughts short. Davies pushed back his chair. "I'll, um...." He dipped his head at the notebook. "I guess you'll be wanting some privacy to read that." She craned her neck, peering up at him, a little surprised. It was almost as if she was seeing the colonel with fresh eyes. He'd always seemed a bit distant, caught up in some private joke he never shared. But now his expression was soft, his gaze gentle and devoid of amusement. "I'll keep Chavez busy."

She offered him a nod of gratitude. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." His mustache quivered into a smile. "And if you, you know," he coughed slightly, "want to talk...." He shrugged, as if suddenly shy.

Emily smiled back. "I'll find you."

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