

# Seven Hours And Fifteen Days

by Tanaqui

Emily settled herself onto a stool and peered along the bar until she caught Mary's eye. Waiting for Mary to finish serving the customer she was with, Emily took a handful of peanuts from a bowl and began to toy with them, while she kept her head cocked, listening. Soon enough, the jukebox finished the song it was playing, gave its characteristic cough, and launched into the next record. As the familiar opening notes stole across Bailey's, Emily wondered to herself what kind of idiot would choose a break-up song for "our song"?

The kind of idiot who thinks she's never going to lose her guy.

She found she'd separated the peanuts into two piles. *One for me and one for you....* Angrily, she swept the nuts together, reflecting that, even when Jake had skipped town five—no, nearly six years ago now—she'd never really thought she'd lost him. It was like when they went to college: he might have been out in Arizona while she was in Wichita, but she knew he was still hers, even if he only answered one letter in five that she sent him, and then only with a few hastily scrawled lines. So when he left again, she'd grieved for Chris, and gotten mad at her dad, and mad at Jake for not taking care of Chris, all the while comforting herself by knowing that, somewhere out there, he was missing her.

She'd held on to that belief even when it became clear he wasn't coming back in a few weeks, or even a few months. Gail had passed on snippets about how he was doing whenever she heard from him. Which was maybe every couple of months during the first year; after that, there'd been a long silence. And then she'd met Roger, and he'd pursued her with the kind of single-minded determination that had made him so successful in business. It had been so nice to be wanted and spoiled and pampered again.

But a little bit of her knew that, wherever Jake was, he hadn't forgotten her. Just like she hadn't forgotten him. And—.

"What can I get you?"

Mary's voice startled Emily out of her memories. She looked up and only half returned Mary's smile. "Whiskey." Trying to pull herself from her gloom, she wriggled up straighter on the stool and pushed the peanuts to one side.

Mary gave her a questioning look, but was back a moment later with a shot glass and a bottle of the godawful stuff that J&R had supplied once it became impossible to get Jim Beam or Jack Daniels or anything else from the other side of the Mississippi. Mary poured the drink and then paused. Reaching across the bar, she gave Emily's hand a squeeze. "You just give me a holler if you need anything, okay?"

Emily nodded without looking at her.

Putting her palms around the glass, Emily rolled it between them. She'd been right; Jake hadn't forgotten about her. She'd seen it when he'd finally come back to town, known she still had him wrapped around her little finger. And he'd confirmed his feelings that evening after her father had been hounded out of Jericho. He'd surprised her by finding the track—the same one that was

playing now—on Mary's jukebox, and he'd asked her to dance, and he'd nearly kissed her. Nearly taken away the pain of being without him for five years. If they hadn't been interrupted by Roger coming back....

Emily tightened her hands around the glass, and then picked it up and angrily tossed back the whiskey. It burned her throat, but not as much her heart burned at the thought that she seemed to have lost him some time in the last few weeks without quite knowing how.

Her restless fingers found the peanuts again, and began to arrange them around the glass. *He loves me, he loves me not....* Perhaps getting back together with him after his dad died hadn't been the best move, but she couldn't bear to see him hurting when she knew she could make him happy again. And they'd been good together, hadn't they? Until he got back from Texas....

She could understand that he needed time to get over whatever hell Beck had put him through at the hog farm. And all that nonsense he and Hawkins had been mixed up in. But why wouldn't he let her help him? Why push her away? Why go stay at the ranch, where she couldn't take care of him? Where he could get strange ideas....

Shaking her head in annoyance—God, he could be such an idiot!—she looked up and again waved Mary over. She noticed as Mary came along the bar that the jukebox had coughed, reset itself and begun playing the same record. Mary had apparently noticed it too, because she turned her head and looked briefly in the direction of the jukebox as she approached.

Emily pushed the glass across the bar towards her. "Another one, please."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? Maybe a glass of wine...." Mary's tone was light but there was a hint that it wasn't really a suggestion.

Emily shook her head and shrugged slightly. "Sometimes you're just in the mood...."

She left the sentence unfinished, but Mary seemed to get the message, because she gave Emily a sympathetic nod and fetched the whiskey bottle again. While Mary was gone, Emily wondered if Jake had talked to Eric. The two of them had seemed much closer since Jake had returned, and she'd seen Jake ducking into Bailey's a couple of times the week after he left for the ranch. Part of his strategy for avoiding her when she'd tried to corner him in town. Other times, as she'd started forward eagerly towards him, he'd changed direction, hailing one of the Rangers from across the street and getting involved in some drawn-out conversation. She'd been too proud to hang around waiting for him to finish; the town gossips were probably having a field day as it was.

Yet as time wore on, the days he'd been gone felt longer than the years he'd been away. Because there wasn't the wrath of her father, or the disappointment of his, or Sheriff Dawson looking to have a word keeping him from her. There was only him, and whatever crazy ideas he'd got in his head.

Finally, she'd cornered him in City Hall, as they were leaving the latest Town Meeting. She stopped him in the entrance with a hand on his arm. "Jake. I haven't seen you in days. Not since...."

"I know." He looked down at her, his expression guilty, his gaze sliding away. "I'm sorry."

"I—." It was all suddenly too much. Her eyes filled with tears, and she just wanted him home. Whatever was going on with him, they'd be fine if he just came home and let her take care of him. She slid her hand down his arm and twined her fingers in his. "Please come home, Jake."

He squeezed her hand for a moment, and she thought he was going to say yes. Then he carefully extricated his fingers from hers. "Em, I—." He turned his head away, biting his lip.

She became aware that the people streaming out of the meeting around them were starting to slow and stop, apparently to chat to friends. A small space was opening up round the two of them.

He seemed to notice it too, because he took her arm and gently led her towards the rooms on the far side of the entrance hall from the Sheriff's Office, where the Mayor's offices used to be. When he did that, cold fear trickled down her spine, because surely Jake Green, her Jake, would have happily swept her into his arms, and told her he loved her, and kissed her in front of the whole town. Taking her to one side could only mean—.

Shutting the door behind them, he turned back to her. "I'm not coming home, Emily. At least, not...."

"Not to me?" she finished for him in a whisper.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"Why?" She reached for him, trying to slip her arms around his neck. "We're good together...."

He caught her arms gently and held her off. "No. We're not. Not any more. We're not the people we used to be. And I should never have let us get back together." He let go of her arms and reached up to smooth her hair back from her face, his touch familiar and comforting even as his words stuck a knife through her heart. "I don't want to hurt you—."

"Then come back to me."

He shook his head, his gaze fixed intently on her. "I can't do that. I'm sorry, Em, but you want me to do things I can't do. Be things I can't be." Again he stroked her hair, and it was so right. How could he say these things when they felt so right together? Yet he went on talking, went on twisting the knife. "I could try and pretend, but it wouldn't make us happy. I'm not the guy who left here five years ago."

"But you could be...." A pleading note had crept into her voice.

He shook his head again. "I don't want to be." He frowned and murmured half to himself, "I'm not sure I ever did...."

He'd tilted her head forwards and dropped a kiss on the top of her head and murmured, "Take care, Emily", and then he was gone.

The memory of his touch, his words, his absence brought a lump to her throat and tears to her eyes. She still couldn't understand how he couldn't want to be her Jake any more.

She sniffed hard, determined not to waste any more time on Jake Green. She'd promised herself she was going to have an evening out and have some fun. Truth was, she couldn't stand the long evenings alone at the Greens. Gail had been working the swing shift at the clinic for the past few days and the house had been empty when Emily got home from school. Empty, but still echoing with Jake's presence: in the pictures of him propped on the sidetables, and in the clothes in the closet in the guest bedroom that they'd been sharing because it had the double bed.

Echoing with his absence, too, because the bed was so empty without him, and his old room, when she ventured in, felt like he'd just stepped out. She even found a strip of pictures from a photo booth of the two of them together, looking so young and so much like they were in love, and she didn't know where those people had gone.

So. Fun. She'd got herself dressed up, and she was going to have some fun. No one would be able to claim Emily Sullivan was moping around over Jake Green. Seizing her glass, she tossed back the second shot of whiskey.

Someone slid onto the stool next to her. "Hey, it's Emily, right?" She looked up and saw it was one of the guys Jake had come back with from Texas—the spook. He was signaling to Mary. "Can I buy you a drink?"

She turned her head away and fiddled with her glass. In the background, the jukebox had started a third rendition on the song. She caught Mary looking across at it and then at her with narrowed eyes. "I'm not really in the mood." She moved her glass along the bar away from him a little.

"Which is exactly why you need someone to buy you a drink." The guy—Chavez, she remembered his name was—had leaned one elbow on the bar and rested his chin on his hand, angling himself towards her. Not so close he made her uncomfortable, but definitely showing an interest.

Glancing up, she saw he was grinning cheerfully. She gave a resigned shrug.

"Whatever the lady's drinking," he told Mary as she came over to serve them, "and I'll have whatever that stuff is that Cheyenne claims is bourbon."

Emily muttered, "Same again, please", not daring to look at Mary.

"So," Chavez was tidying up the peanuts she'd been playing with and dropping them into an ashtray, "I hear you're a Jericho girl born and bred? Lived here all your life?"

"Yeah."

Mary had finished pouring the drinks. Glancing across at Chavez, Emily saw him nod at Mary, holding her gaze for a moment as some kind of silent communication passed between them. Probably about her. She ought to be annoyed about it, but it was just the way in Jericho. Everyone knew everyone's business, and thought nothing about sticking their noses into it.

Much to her surprise, Emily found herself adding. "Except when I went to college in Wichita, and grad school in Topeka to get my teaching license." That was when she'd met Roger, in town for some bankers' conference.

"Uh-huh. You teach High School, right?" Chavez had now turned his intense, warm gaze on her.

"You been running a background check on me?" It was only half a joke.

He shrugged. "Just askin' around."

"I guess only making it out of Kansas a handful of times seems kinda funny to someone like you." She started playing with her glass again.

"Someone like me?" He sounded amused.

"You're a spy, right?" She looked up at him. "You must've been all sorts of places."

"A few." His face was suddenly more guarded, and she guessed he didn't like talking about his work..

"And now you're stuck in Jericho." She raised her glass to him in an ironic salute and then downed the whiskey.

"There are worse places. 'Specially if I can find someone to show me the sights. Like a nice local girl...." He held her gaze when she looked back at him, one eyebrow slightly raised.

Emily twisted on her stool so she was half facing him. Quite deliberately, knowing she must be watching him, he ran his gaze down her and then back up, checking her out. When he once more met her gaze, she could see the admiration in his expression, and the hunger. She was used to guys making eyes at her and used to ignoring the creepy ones—the guys who already seemed to be running a porn movie in their heads—but she liked the way Chavez was looking at her. It was nice to be looked at like that again, because Jake—.

She pushed the thought away and defiantly, without quite meaning to, found herself checking Chavez out in return: fit body, cute butt, nice hands, and a sort of cat-like strength and grace to him. A little voice whispered in the back of her head: *you wanted some fun, didn't you?*

Across the bar from her, Mary was clattering dirty glasses into the sink, drowning out the start of the low, breathy vocals as they played for a fourth time. "Jeez, Em." She threw Emily an annoyed look. "How many times did you put that song on?" Not waiting for an answer, she headed round the end of the bar to bus tables.

Emily watched her go, a little surprised at the other woman's irritation. It was just a song. Turning back to Chavez, she realized he was waiting for a response from her. Unnerved by how unsettled he was making her feel, she shrugged, "You've seen Main Street?" When he nodded, she added. "That's about it round here."

"Really?" He sipped his bourbon, grimaced, and put it back down barely touched. "No famous gunfights? World's largest? Tours of the home of Jericho's best-known native?"

Suddenly, she was tired of his constant air of amusement. His arrogance. How damn patronizing he was, treating them like hicks. He wasn't fit to lick the boots of the people of Jericho, who'd kept this town safe while he'd been running around playing soldier-boy. Men like Jake... Disgust at herself rose up in her throat. How could she even have thought for a moment—?

She squared up to him. "Oh, well, when you put it like that...." He reeled back from the venom in her voice. "Why don't I take you out the bridge that Jake stood in the middle of and threatened to blow up, along with himself, to stop Ravenwood overrunning us? Or shall I show you the shrapnel marks from when New Bern shelled us? Maybe you'd like a tour of Richmond Farm and have a gawp at where Johnston Green died and Bonnie Richmond was murdered? Or would you prefer to visit the Med Center and hear all about the siege? As for Jericho's best-known native?" He'd held up his hands defensively, but she was too angry to stop. "Well, I guess you've already met *him*."

Turning away from him to hide the tears filling her eyes, she waved over the other bartender and furiously demanded another whiskey. When it came, she tossed it back, reveling in the burn as it hit the back of her throat.

"Hey." Chavez touched her shoulder. She tried to shake him off, but he gripped her arm gently. "I'm sorry, okay? I just wanted to spend some time with you."

She looked up at him, and he did seem bothered he'd upset her. The uncertain smile he was directing at her hadn't completely smoothed away the slight frown creasing his forehead or the troubled look in his eyes. It certainly wasn't the kind of response she was used to from guys in bars when she good as told them to take a hike. Some got pissed, and some just walked away. They didn't look like they actually cared they'd said the wrong thing. Didn't hang around trying to talk her down like Jake always had when she let fly at him....

Chavez's voice pulled her from memories of Jake. "Guess with all the changes we've seen, I need to find myself some new lines." When she refocused her gaze on him, she saw he was grinning self-deprecatingly at her.

She couldn't help her lips twitching in response. The energy to sustain her outburst of anger had ebbed away, and she just felt tired. "I think you always needed some new lines," she pointed out.

"Maybe so." He grin had turned into a warm smile, and he was again looking at her with an appreciative gaze. She realized that he had loosened his grip on her arm, and was now running his palm quietly from her shoulder down to her elbow and back again. His touch was soothing and at the same time rekindled that spark of attraction there'd been between them earlier. Because he was still cute, and he had something of Jake's concern for her, and something of Roger's hunger for her, and she missed those things.

He held her gaze, not speaking but conveying better than any pick-up line could with his touch and his expression how much he wanted to be with her. She licked her lips. "Maybe—."

Her attempt to offer an olive branch was cut off by the jukebox screeching to an abrupt halt as Mary bent and yanked the plug out of the wall, putting an end to the opening chords of a fifth time through the same song. "Emily Sullivan." Her voice was loud in the sudden silence. "Out. Now."

Emily opened her mouth to protest, but Chavez slid his hand under her elbow. "C'mon. I'll walk you home." He threw a couple of bills onto the bar as he lifted her to her feet. She tried to pull away from him, still ready to argue the point with Mary, but her body didn't seem to be entirely under her control, and she ended up staggering against him instead.

He guided her out into the cooling evening before she could gather her wits. The fresh air, when it hit her, made her sway again.

"Whoa, there!" He slid his arm further around her to steady her.

"I'll be okay." Again, she tried to shake him off, but his grip on her remained firm and sure as he began to steer her down the sidewalk. She had to admit that it felt nice to be taken care of. Usually, when she'd been this drunk, Jake had been even drunker, and they'd had to hold each other up to get home. Except for that time with the apple wine coolers, when he'd held the hair back out of her face while she heaved in the back alley.

By the time she'd thought about all of that, Chavez had already gotten her several yards down the street and was pouring her into the passenger seat of a pickup.

"I'm... I don't usually...." She tried to explain.

"I know."

"It's just... Jake..."

"I know." He gently squeezed her shoulder, before shutting the door and scooting round to the driver's side.

She tipped her head back against the headrest and closed her eyes, giving up the fight. She heard him start the car, and the lurch as they moved off, but she kept her eyes shut, grateful he was driving her home. She really shouldn't have had that last whiskey.

When he stopped the car, she let him help her out, and then stood blinked up at the house looming over them. "That's not my home."

"You own the place, right?" Chavez was fishing the keys out of the pocket of his fatigues as he bounded up the steps.

"Yes, but...." Emily hesitated at the bottom of the steps.

When she didn't follow him, he turned back to her. "I don't think going back to the Greens' tonight is such a good idea, do you?" He held one hand out to her, while he swung the door open behind him with the other. "C'mon."

Too tired to object—too dizzy from the booze and sick at heart as well—Emily followed him inside.

He waved her toward the living room. "Take a seat and I'll make you some coffee. Sober you up." He grinned over his shoulder at her as headed for the kitchen. "Still got a bit of Jamaican Blue left."

There didn't seem much reason not to do what he'd suggested. She wandered into the living room and sat down on the couch. Looking around, the familiarity was disconcerting. All these things were hers, hers and Rogers, but they felt like they'd belonged to some distant great-aunt: she'd seen them once, years ago, and now she'd inherited them and she owned them, but they didn't feel like they were hers.

Sinking back into the cushions, she closed her eyes again.

oOo

She must have fallen asleep, because when she next opened her eyes, she was lying on her side, her head pillowed against the arm of the couch. Her feet were tucked up on the seat, with a throw over them. For a moment, she didn't know quite *when* it was, and then she looked up and saw Chavez, sitting in one of the easy chairs watching her.

"Oh." She sat up, untangling the throw from her legs with one hand while she pushed her hair back off her face with the other.

"Feeling better?"

She blushed. She didn't think she'd had that much to drink.... "Yeah." She rubbed her forehead. "Bit of a headache."

Chavez nodded. He moved forward to the edge of his chair and picked up a glass of water from the table. "Here. Drink this first." Taking it from him, she saw he'd brought in a tray with mugs and an insulated flask, and she remembered he'd said he'd make coffee.

"How long was I...?" She sipped the water gratefully and felt the slight headache and the horrible taste in her mouth begin to fade.

"An hour." He shrugged, unscrewing the flask and pouring them coffee.

She took the mug he held out to her. "Thanks. And thanks," she blushed, "for looking after me when...."

He smiled and settled back in his chair, his hands wrapped round his own coffee mug. "You're welcome."

She watched as he closed his eyes, breathed in a deep sniff of the aroma wafting from the coffee, and let out a contented sigh. She took a sip from her own cup and mentally shrugged. It was good coffee, but she'd never understood why people—Heather was another one—made such a big deal out of it.

She took another sip. "I guess I made a bit of a fool of myself back in Bailey's." She was trying to remember just how loudly she'd been yelling at him when she'd made her little 'speech'.

He opened his eyes and smiled at her. "Not so's anyone'd notice."

"In this town?" She snorted derisively.

He grinned. "You have a point." He took another sip of coffee. "So, was that your song? Yours and Jake's."

She glanced away from him and nodded. "I guess the whole town knows about that, too?"

"It's been discussed, yes." He cleared his throat. "I'd say I'm sorry, but... that's not going to make you feel any better, is it?"

She smiled wryly. "Not really, no."

She heard him put his cup down. "I could maybe think of something that might."

She looked up at him and saw he was leaning forward on the edge of his seat, his arms resting on his knees. His gaze was fixed intently on her, and one eyebrow was raised, inviting a response to the question in his eyes.

"I'm..." She grew hot, remembering how she'd flirted back at him when he'd first hit on her at Bailey's. She swallowed and tried again. "Sorry. I'm not available."

"I thought you were." He held her gaze quietly, apparently unfazed by her response.

She shook her head. "Jake and I are... it's just... temporary. It's been a crazy few weeks and...." Why was she even trying to explain to him? She put her mug down. "I should go home."



By the time she'd got to her feet, Chavez had half-interposed himself between her and the door, not quite blocking her path.

"I'd rather you didn't." He reached out and lightly put his hand on her arm, catching her gaze and holding it. She felt again the same tingle of electricity between them she'd felt in Bailey's.

She took a step sideways, edging past him. He didn't do anything to stop her, but his expression turned a shade disappointed. A little desperately, maybe trying to convince herself as much as him, she said, "Jake *loves* me."

Chavez nodded. "I'm sure he does. I think he cares about you a great deal. But I don't think he's *in* love with you." He shrugged. "Look, I can't pretend to know him half as well as you do, but from what I've seen.... I don't think he's going to get back with you."

Emily licked her lips. "What do you mean, what you've seen?" Her voice was hoarse, the words sticking in her throat.

Chavez hesitated a moment, as if deciding what to say. "Got to spend a little time with him on the way back from Texas. And he wanted to get home. But didn't seem like it was because you were here."

Emily wanted to deny it; to tell him he was wrong. But she couldn't. Because she'd had proof enough when he first got back that he didn't want to be around her.

Chavez had begun stroking her arm again. "I, on the other hand....," he gave her a wolfish grin and took a step closer, "have this thing for tall, gorgeous blondes."

She glanced at the door. She knew he wouldn't try to stop her if she left. But she could see desire in his eyes, and feel the heat where he touched her, and she wanted to be wanted. Because the memory of the way Jake had looked at her when he told her it was over still sat inside her like a sharp-edged stone.

Chavez edged a little closer. "C'mon, Emily. Maybe you and Jake'll get back together some time. But right now, he doesn't want to be with you. And I do. You can mope around and be miserable. Or you and I can have a little fun."

Wasn't that exactly what she'd told herself at the start of the evening? And surely when Jake saw her with someone else, he'd realize.... She breathed in deeply and gave a small nod.

Chavez lifted his hands and stroked the hair back from her temples. Just like—.

She was assaulted by the memory of Jake in Bailey's, their song playing on the jukebox. Right before Roger returned.

She jerked her head back a little and Chavez stilled. "We don't have to do this, you know?"

She pushed away the memory of Jake. "But you want to?" she whispered. "You want me?"

"Uh-huh." His gaze held hers intently. When she didn't move away from him again, he leaned forward and kissed her, sliding his hands down to cup her face and draw her closer.

Her lips parted automatically as he confidently explored her mouth. He didn't taste like Jake, and he

didn't taste like Roger, but he tasted good, and she knew he wanted her, and that *felt* good.

He slid his hands down to rest on her shoulders, his thumbs caressing her neck, while his tongue found hers. She gasped at the touch, electricity coursing through her. His hands tightened on her shoulders for a moment, as he kissed her more intently, before he ran them on down her, letting them rest on her breasts, his thumbs caressing her nipples where they strained at the fabric of her tank top. Then his hands moved on again, down to her waist, pulling her close. She could feel him hard against her, and a hot stab of fire shot through her, because he did want her: there could be no doubt about it. And she wanted him. Wanted him to fill the aching hole within her.

She tried to back up so they could crash back on to the couch, but he stood firm. His mouth slid away from her at last, his lips questing down her neck, and he murmured, "Not downstairs."

He stepped back and, finding her gaze, held it as he drew her out into the hall and upstairs. She was glad when he steered her away from the master bedroom and towards one of the other rooms, because that would have been too weird.

Stopping by the bed, he slipped his arms around her waist to draw her closer. He began kissing her again, while his hands worked their way up under her tank top, sliding across her bare skin. She ran her palms down him and cupped his ass, pulling him against her again so she could feel him, and know he still wanted her because, god, she wanted him inside her so much. His hands found her bra, his mouth faltering on hers for a moment as he unhooked it. Then he was kissing her hard again, while his hands slid round between them to cover her breasts. She pressed herself against them, groaning at his touch on her skin.

With a swift move, he stepped back, hauling her top and bra over her head, and dragging his own T-shirt off. Then, once more, he wrapped his arms around her and his mouth found hers again, hard and demanding. He pulled her tightly against him, and his heat against her, bare skin pressed against bare skin, and the scent of him—god, he smelled good!—made her dizzy as she returned the kiss.

His hands slid round between them again, this time busy with her jeans. He unzipped them and slipped them down, along with her panties. He followed them down, sliding them over her legs and helping her kick out of them. Still on his knees, he ran his hands back up her bare legs to cup her ass. Drawing her towards him, he planted a soft kiss on the swell of her mound, just above where her hair curled dark gold, and she shivered at the feel of his mouth on her.

She put her hands on his face and tipped his head back so she look into his eyes. They seemed a darker blue in the dim light, still filled with desire. "You really want me?" she asked again, needing to be sure, and he nodded slowly, running his tongue over his lips in a way that sent another shiver through her.

His hands had slid away from her. To get rid of his own jeans, she realized: when he rose to his feet, he was naked. Glancing down, she saw that her was more than ready for action, and she reached out a hand to take hold of him, but he caught her wrist to stop her, murmuring, "Not yet." Instead, he encouraged her to slip her arms around his neck, as he backed them up and stretched them out across the bed.

He bent his head, trailing kisses down her neck, and on down the swell of her breast, until he could capture her nipple in his mouth, gently suckling it. His hand stroked her thigh, first along the outside in long trailing caresses, and then slowly working his way inward in small circles, while she quivered under his touch. She ran her fingers over his tight-cropped hair at first, all she could reach

without disturbing him. Then her hands fluttered and stilled as his lips and fingers working on her made it hard to remember to do anything else, even breathe.

His mouth came back to hers as his questing fingers worked ever closer to the heart of her, his tongue teasing hers. At last, his fingers slipped gently between her warm, moist folds, drawing a gasp of pleasure and anticipation from her. They stayed there unmoving for a moment as he pulled back from kissing her, his gaze seeking out hers. "How do you like it?"

"What?" She didn't want words, just him. She tried to kiss him again, but pulled his head further away.

"On top? On the bottom?" He quirked an eyebrow. "From behind? Some girls, that works best."

"I—." She felt herself go hot, because no one had ever asked before. She and Jake had just worked it out between them out as fumbling teenagers, and Roger had pretty much followed her lead in the bedroom, let her do what she wanted. "On top," she managed to stammer.

"Okay." He smiled at her and leaned forward for another kiss—that he again cut too short for her liking. "But first...." He wriggled so he could reach over to the nightstand and fish out a condom from the drawer, and then rolled onto his back. She straddled him, intending to take the condom from him and roll it on, but he was so damn quick that he had the thing out of the packet and half on before she could say, "Let me."

All she could do was slide her hands down his length following him. His hips shuddered slightly and, lifting her head, she saw a look of concentration on his face. Then his hands were on her hips, and he was lifting her into place, and she was guiding him into her and sinking down on him.

He felt good inside her, filling her where she'd been greedy and aching for this. She pushed away the memory of the last time with Jake, when it had felt just as good to have him inside her, and then turned out so... disappointing.

Looking down at Chavez, she saw he was smiling faintly at her, but there was a hint of worry in his expression. He reached up a hand and stroked her hair back from her face. "You okay?"

She nodded, and took a deep breath, and began to move, sliding over him. He let her set the pace, long slow strokes at first, his hands on her hips to support her as she shifted slightly with each stroke, trying to find just the right position, just the right angle. Looking down at him, she saw he'd closed his eyes, and the frown of concentration had returned. Then she shifted again, and forgot to wonder what he was thinking, because they were moving together in just the right way; she gasped at the feel of it, of him moving against her, the wave of pleasure that shot through her....

She began to move more quickly, and he went with her, his movements sure and steady underneath her as she rode him, driving herself towards climax on him: eyes shut, nothing in the world for her but the powerful pulses at the heart of her, coming faster and faster, until she let out a triumphant cry as, with almost unbearable intensity, she came around him.

He followed a moment later, thrusting into her with a groan as she tightened on him.

They shuddered to stillness, and he slid his hands up to wrap them around her back and pull her down against his chest. He was breathing hard, matching her own exhausted panting, and she could feel his heart racing as she lay against him.

They lay there like that for a moment, and then he cupped her face and tipped her head back so he could meet her gaze. "Good, huh?" He still sounded a little out of breath.

She nodded, and he dipped her head so he could kiss her briefly. Pulling back, he continued to look at her, his gaze roving across her features as he gently stroked her damp hair back from her face.

With a slight sigh, he slid his hands down to her hips and encouraged her off him.

The midsummer air seemed cold against her skin as he turned away from her to get rid of the condom. She felt abandoned for a moment, but he was quickly back, pulling her against him so that her head rested on his shoulder. His arms around her, holding her close, felt good, almost as good as making love had done. Nestling against him, she had to admit that it hadn't been that good in a long time. Not with Jake since they'd got back together; not often at all with Roger in the couple of years she'd been with him. Not bad, not by a long shot, but not... this. Not since before Jake had gone away. She wondered briefly if Jake and Chavez were both right: Jake still loved her, but he couldn't be what she wanted him to be, not right now.

She turned her face into Chavez's shoulder, and wrapped her arm more tightly around him.

Maybe she dozed a little—she hadn't been sleeping too good since Jake left—because she realized after a while that Chavez was stroking her arm gently with his fingertips: long, soothing caresses. She tipped her head back to look at him, and saw he was smiling down at her.

"You are one very beautiful woman, Emily Sullivan," he murmured, still running his hand over her arm. The words were almost unnecessary: the desire on his face was just as plain.

He bent his head but, instead of kissing her on the mouth, as she expected, he dipped lower and trailed a row of kisses along her shoulder. Capturing her hand in his, he lifted her arm and carried on moving his lips downwards with soft kisses. Reaching her wrist, he turned her arm so he could work back up the inside. His movements were deliberate and unhurried; Emily found herself breathing deeply in anticipation, suspecting he had some grand plan for her pleasure.

When he reached her shoulder again, he nuzzled her armpit, breathing in her scent. Despite the lack of most of the things she'd once considered essential for keeping herself sweet – like endless hot running water and deodorant – she must still have smelled good to him, because she felt him stiffening against her thigh. It brought an answering tug deep inside her, even before his kisses worked their way down her shoulder and his mouth once more settled on her breast.

He let go of her wrist and slid his hand around her back, lifting her towards him as he swirled his tongue around and across her nipple. She moaned softly, because it felt good, and she wanted him to know. She reached down to rest her hand on his thigh for moment, before sliding it round to wrap her fingers around him.

Quite gently, but with surprising speed, he had his hand on hers, pulling her away from him and grasping her wrist. He shifted, lifting himself, and pressed her arm back against the bed. In the same move, he had somehow grasped her other wrist in *his* other hand, so that she found herself lightly pinned. His touch was soft, and she knew that if she'd struggled at all, shown that she wasn't completely comfortable with what he was doing, he would have released her. But she didn't struggle: she lay quite still, a little excited by the fact he apparently knew exactly what he wanted to do with her and to her.

He grinned down at her and shook his head. "Don't...."

She wondered why he didn't want her to touch him. Jake and Roger had both liked that: it had been a sure-fire way of getting their attention, revving them up even if they'd intended no more than a quick kiss. So why—?

She stopped wondering when he once more bent to the task of exploring her skin with his lips. While his mouth teased her, he shifted again, nudging her knees with his, and she obediently opened her legs so he could kneel between them.

Still holding her wrists pressed to the bed, he worked his way down her stomach in a long, slow zig-zag. She thought she knew what he was aiming for, and she lifted her hips slightly towards him because, oh God, she wanted it. His teasing touch as he worked his way across the soft swell of her mound from one hip to the other made her shiver and she held her breath, dizzy with anticipation, remembering the few times Jake had done this. It hadn't been often: not because he wouldn't or didn't like it, but because mostly, in satisfying him, she reached her own satisfaction. But when he had done this, it had been good, very g—.

Again, she stopped thinking about the past as the present claimed her: Chavez had run his tongue down the crease where her thigh met her stomach, before letting go of her wrists so he could slip his hands under her and lift her towards him and slide his tongue over her. She let out a long moan as a burst of pleasure rushed through her, and pushed herself towards him while his tongue flickered across her as expertly as it had across her nipples just a little while ago.

While he continued to swirl his tongue over her, or lick with long slow strokes, or gently suckle her—pleasure and torment and pleasure again—she pressed her hands into the bed. The feel of the comforter under her faded away as her whole world narrowed down to the mounting ripples of sensation coursing through her and over her, growing ever stronger, ever deeper. Then suddenly she was washed away by the tide, powerful and insistent: her hips bucked as she came, and his mouth, still on her, drove another wave surging through her, and another, and another..... Spent at last, she collapsed back, chest heaving as if she'd just run a sprint, shaking with exhaustion and yet utterly satisfied.

The heat within her slowly faded, and her breathing steadied, but she kept her eyes shut, reveling in the memory of how good it had felt. At last the glow wore off, and she opened her eyes. Raising herself on her elbows, she looked down at Chavez at the other end of the bed.

He had sat back, gaze roving over her naked form spread before him, and was jerking himself off.

She struggled to sit up, intending to add her touch to his, but he held up a hand to fend her off. She froze, not sure why he was so insistent she didn't touch him, and a little afraid to find out what would happen if she ignored his commands and did. Watching him apparently happy to get off on what he'd done to her and what he was doing to himself, she wasn't sure why she was worrying about it so much, except that it seemed... wrong.

Even as she thought that, he came with a long, low groan.

He sagged back for a moment, panting, before hauling himself up and crawling back up the bed to her. She opened her arms and he fell into them, letting her pull him against her, both of them damp and sticky.

After a minute, she said tentatively, "I would've...."

"I know." He sighed and lifted himself on one elbow, scooting up the bed a little so his face was level with hers. He gently brushed her hair back off her face with his free hand. "I don't want you... doing things just to make *me* feel good, okay?"

She nodded. "But—."

He put a finger to her lips to hush her. "If you really get off on that stuff, then that's okay. But if it's just because you think it's what guys want, that if you don't do that, they won't be interested in you..." He shook his head slightly. "We're here because I've wanted to do you pretty much since I first saw you." He let his hand fall to her shoulder and then slid it down to cup her breast. "And I want to do you again soon as I can manage it. So you don't need to do that stuff just because you think it's the only way to get me interested...."

His gaze held hers with such intensity that she believed him. And while she wanted him to make love to her again tonight, and maybe tomorrow night and the night after—because, damn, it was good with him—she knew she wasn't seeing beyond the next time any more than he was.

He must have seen some kind of acceptance in her face, because he pulled her closer and dropped a brief kiss on her forehead. Then he slid away from her for a moment so he could rearrange them with her lying in the crook of his arm, her head resting on his shoulder, the comforter pulled over them against the cooling night air.

She lay there, drawing small circles on his chest with her fingertips, enjoying the comfort of his arm around her. "I don't even know your first name."

"Uh-huh." He sounded amused.

When he didn't say any more, she tipped her head back to look at him. His free arm was behind his head and, as she'd suspected, he was smirking a little..

"So what is it?" When he quirked an eyebrow at the question, she added impatiently. "Your first name."

He laughed and briefly pulled her closer. "Only people use my first name are my mom and the IRS." He shrugged slightly. "Most people call me Chavez. Least, when they don't know me as somebody else."

She gave him a long hard look. "You're really not going to tell me?"

His only answer was another grin, before he closed his eyes and settled himself as if he was planning to fall asleep.

Feeling slightly nettled, she rested her head back against his shoulder and shut her own eyes. She must have fallen asleep herself, because when she next opened her eyes, it was growing light and the dawn chorus was in full swing outside. Her shoulders were chilled where the morning air brushed across her, but she was warm where she lay against him.

Tipping her head back, she saw he still seemed to be asleep, but when she started to move, he swiftly came awake.

"Hey." He blinked down at her.

"Hey."

There was a moment of awkwardness, and she wondered if he was regretting last night. If she was. Then he reached up a hand and cradled her face and drew her to him for a long kiss. His mouth explored hers gently, while his hand slid down her back, pulling her closer. She gripped his arm, enjoying the feel of his toned muscles under her hand.

He rolled on to his back, taking her with him so that she was pressed against him. He hardened underneath her, while he stroked his fingertips down her spine and his tongue teased hers. She liked the way he was gentle, and yet knew exactly what he wanted in bed, and wasn't afraid to go after it; just like the way he'd gone after her in the first place.

Breaking this kiss, she sat up, straddling him and resting her hands on his hips. The comforter slid off them, and the cold air hit her back, making her shiver, but there was heat between them where they touched. She licked her lips. "I'd like to...." She trailed her fingers forward a little, towards where his cock strained up at her, unsure whether he'd agree.

He rested his hands on hers. "You don't...."

She stroked her thumbs against his stomach and felt a moment of triumph as his cock twitched in response. "I know I don't have to. I want to."

He sat up suddenly, bringing his face close to hers. His gaze flickered over her face, apparently trying to read what she was thinking. Then he swallowed hard and gently pushed her hands inward. When she wrapped her fingers around him he closed his eyes and groaned.

Leaning forward, she began to kiss her way down his shoulder and chest, running her hands over his length while she slid back until she could bend and take him in her mouth. He let out another groan as her lips closed over him, his hands tightening on hers. When she swirled her tongue across his tip, he gave a strangled moan. His hands fell away to grip the bed and hold himself steady, stopping his hips bucking while she worked on him. Grinning to herself—because apparently there were limits to even his control, and she'd found them—she began to move her mouth over him, her hands helping drive him to climax, her tongue flickering across him as she reveled in each slight gasp that escaped him,.

He came surprisingly quickly, with a wordless cry, and she teased him on for every last moment of pleasure she could coax out of him. Lifting her head when he was done, she saw he was shaking.

She sat up and scooted back towards him, wrapping her arms around him. He buried his face in her shoulder, pulling her close, and she could feel his heart thumping. She was the one to draw back and take his face in her hands and say "Good, huh?"

"Uh-huh." He still sounded a little out of breath. He stroked his hand along her arm and back again while he turned his head and dropped a kiss into her palm. His hand moved on down her side to her hip, and then along her thigh to her raised knee and back again. Pulling her closer with the hand still wrapped around her waist, he let his lips trail over the inside of her wrist and up her arm as she slid her arms around his neck. His lips reclaimed hers while he carried on stroking her thigh, his fingertips working slowly to inwards. She let her knee fall outward, opening herself up to him, the tension building in her belly as she anticipated his touch on her.

He circled his fingers across her mound for a moment before slipping one fingertip down between her folds. She moaned as his touch brushed across her, and then his finger slid on and inside her,

slipping deep into her because she was ready and aching for this. She felt him add a second finger, helping to fill her, and she pulled her mouth away from his and arched her back, pushing her hips toward him because she wanted him deep within her. He set a steady, quickening rhythm, his thumb brushing over her clit while his fingers moved inside her, driving pulses of pleasure through her. It was almost better than having his cock in her had been—a third finger joined the first two as she greedily sucked at him—because his touch was more subtle, his fingertips curling inside her. His mouth roved across her breasts, each flick of his tongue across her nipples making the surges within her deeper, more intense. Until, at last, she came around him with a hard, wild cry, while—as she had done to him—he urged another wave and another wave out of her until she could give no more.

She fell back against him, exhausted and sated, and he held her close. He was breathing hard, too, and she wondered if he'd liked doing that almost as much as she'd like having it done to her. Gradually, their breathing steadied, but she stayed wrapped around him, her face buried in his shoulder, because it felt safe: just for a few moments, she didn't have to struggle and fight to deal with the world.

At last he gently pushed her away from him. "Time's getting on." He brushed her hair back from her face. "You should probably go before...." He gave her a half-hearted smile. "You know better'n me what this place is like for gossip, and I don't want to make things difficult for you."

She nodded. It wasn't often the town turned against someone, but she didn't think they'd understand this. How she'd needed this.

He stroked his thumb across her cheek. "I'd like to do this again some time, but... that's for you to decide."

"No strings?" It was halfway between a statement and a question.

He nodded, his expression serious. "Yeah. Just a good time." He drew her back to him for a brief, fierce kiss. "And it was. You're one hell of a lady, Emily Sullivan."

oOo

Emily quietly opened the front door to the house on Washington Drive and slipped inside. With any luck, she'd make it upstairs before—.

"Oh, there you are, honey." Gail was carrying a pot of coffee out of the kitchen to set down on the dining table. "I went to wake you, but you weren't in your room."

"I, uh—." Emily was horribly aware that she was wearing yesterday's clothes and she thought she could smell Chavez on herself. Not that Gail would be able to detect that from across the room, but Emily felt like *I've been screwing around* was tattooed across her face.

Gail was fiddling with the breakfast things on the table. "I thought maybe you'd spent the night out at the ranch...." She sounded like it was no big deal, but Emily knew it was.

"I...." She stopped and reached out for the stair rail to steady herself. The temptation to lie and pretend that she had been out there was strong, but she knew it would be a stupid thing to do. Gail would quickly find out—Emily had a vision of her enthusiastically cornering Jake to ask when he was coming back home now he and Emily were back together—and then she'd be even more disappointed. Not to mention that someone would no doubt tell her about what had happened in Bailey's



Gail looked up, her expression hopeful, waiting for Emily to speak.

"I was over at The Pines." She gave Gail a small, embarrassed smile. "I, er, had a bit much to drink when I was in Bailey's last night, and one of the guys I loaned the house to took me back there to sleep it off."

"Oh, that was kind of him." Emily was impressed at how Gail almost managed to keep the disappointment out of her voice. "You know, Stanley brought me some eggs yesterday. Would you like me to do you a couple over easy. That always makes me feel better when I'm hungover."

"You? Hung over." Emily raised her eyebrows.

Gail was still aimlessly shifting cutlery round the table. "Oh, Johnston and I had our moments."

Emily laughed. "Let me grab a shower, and then I'll have those eggs, and hear all about your and Johnston's moments."

"Take your time, honey." Gail lifted her head and smiled at Emily. "It's good to hear you laughing again."

Heading upstairs, Emily had to agree with her. Jake's absence—the fear that he might not love her any more—was still like knife twisting in her belly every time she thought about it. But being with Chavez had dulled the pain a little, for a while.

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