

Family Someday

by Tanaqui

Mary clattered dirtied coffee cups onto her tray, the sound loud in the mid-afternoon quiet of the bar, and swabbed fiercely at sticky sugar sprinklings. Normally she found bussing tables soothing, but not today. She didn't seem able to keep her mind away from the news Gail had shared two days ago, though it made her flinch like she'd accidentally touched the hotplate on the coffee machine each time she thought about it.

Turning away from the booth, she saw Heather hoisting herself onto one of the bar stools, as if the other woman had been conjured by her thoughts. Come to rub her nose in it? Mary closed her eyes and gave herself a small shake: *Cut it out!* Heather was probably just stopping by like she sometimes did while she waited for Jake to finish up out at the airfield and run her back to the ranch.

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Mary opened her eyes again and saw Heather was staring off into space, a faint frown furrowing her brow. Hardly the look of someone eager for Mary to come across so she could give her a hard time. Shaking her head again, Mary headed down to the bar.

"Hey." She touched Heather's arm and Heather turned. Mary gave her a one-armed hug, made awkward by the full tray she was carrying, and the resentment she still couldn't quite shake. "Congratulations." When Heather raised her eyebrows questioningly, Mary added, "Gail told us. You know, that you and Jake—."

"Oh! Yes." Heather blushed. "I asked her not to, you know. Tell people, I mean. Not until things are further along. But of course she'd want you and Eric to know."

Mary forced a smile onto her face. It must have been convincing, because Heather was still smiling shyly back at her. And Heather surely hadn't meant it the way, just for a moment, Mary had taken it. And neither had Gail when she shared the news. She'd simply been too delighted she was going to be a grandmother to keep the secret; there'd been no hint of reproach toward Mary in her voice.

Still, Mary couldn't help reflect, as she rounded the bar and began stacking the dirty cups in the dishwasher, Heather had had it so much easier. When Jake had finally figured out his feelings and they'd hooked up, Gail had welcomed her into the family enthusiastically. And now, here she was, giving Gail the grandchild that Mary had so far failed to provide.

Squashing down her resentment, because it really wasn't Heather's fault, nor Gail's, Mary closed the dishwasher and straightened. "So, can I get you something? You're waiting for Jake, right?"

"What?" Heather had been staring off into space again. "Oh, yes." She nodded at Mary. "Iced tea, please."

Mary busied herself preparing the drink. Shooting Heather another glance, she saw the other woman was once more frowning, and her hands were twisting together where they rested on the bar. Even if Heather wasn't plotting to torment Mary, it seemed like she did have something on her mind.

Mary took a look round the bar, to check it was still quiet and no one was in earshot, as she put Heather's drink in front of her. "You must be pretty excited, huh?" she probed, thinking Heather seemed anything other than excited.

Heather let out an uncomfortable chuckle. "Excited. Nervous." She hesitated. "Terrified...."

"Terrified?" Mary raised an eyebrow.

Heather gave her a rueful smile. "It's just a bit unexpected. We weren't exactly planning it."

"Oh." Mary jerked her head back, blinking, trying not to let the hurt show in her face. They hadn't even been *trying*? While she and Eric....

She realized Heather was still talking. "Jake's acting like I'm made of spun sugar, and Gail's so very pleased, it's... it's a little scary, you know?"

Mary did know. Gail could be... ferocious where family was concerned. And after what had happened to April, she could understand the Greens being a bit weird about another pregnancy.

Something softened inside her for the first time since Gail had told them the news and Mary had felt a sudden, unexpected ache: the pain of finding she didn't have something she'd never known before she wanted. She'd squashed down her feelings then, and made the right noises, but after Gail had gone home, she and Eric had lain in bed, not speaking but looking at each other. Knowing there was no good reason why they hadn't been the ones giving Gail the same news, and months ago—except there must be some reason, because...

She'd been able to see Eric's pain, just as she knew from the look on his face that he could see hers. At last, he'd reached out and stroked her face gently, before he pulled her close. With a kiss in her hair, he told her without words that it didn't matter, not really, for all it still did.

She hadn't thought about how much pressure there'd be if she and Eric did have a baby. Maybe Heather didn't have it so easy after all.

She reached forward and gave Heather's hand a brief reassuring pat. "You'll be fine."

Heather looked up at her and managed an uncertain smile. "I know." She drew in a deep breath, pulling herself straighter. "I'm just being silly."

Mary busied herself about the bar, refilling the cooler with beers from a crate she'd brought from the storeroom earlier. When she next looked up, she saw Heather was watching her. "What?"

Heather shrugged. "I was just thinking. That you and Eric would...." She stopped abruptly, her cheeks flushing. "I'm sorry. That's—."

"It's okay." Mary couldn't blame Heather for being curious. Closing the cooler door, she picked up a cloth and began wiping down the bar, though it didn't need it. Not looking at Heather, she added, "We've not exactly been trying, but we've not been trying not to, you know? It just... hasn't happened." She shrugged. "Probably won't."

The next moment, it was Heather's turn to reach out reassuringly to Mary, her fingers giving Mary's a comforting squeeze. "I'm sorry." She sat back and took a sip of her iced tea. "But you shouldn't give up hope, you know. My parents were married ten years before I came along." She chuckled. "I gather I was quite the surprise."

Mary nodded. Babies came when they did—and it wasn't as if she'd desperately felt the lack of them for her and Eric, or thought it was all that unusual, until she'd heard Heather was expecting.

The sound of the door opening heralded more customers. Giving Heather a smile that she hoped expressed her gratitude for the attempt to console her, Mary headed along the bar to serve them.

As she poured the drinks, she glanced back at Heather, who was now sitting sipping her iced tea with a thoughtful but less strained expression on her face. In some ways, Heather was no surprise at all. Though it might gall a little, Mary could easily understand why she'd so quickly endeared herself to Gail: the War hadn't spoiled a sweet nature of the kind that Mary had never possessed. Heather certainly hadn't set out to deliberately upstage Mary by getting pregnant.

In fact, Mary thought wryly as she carried the drinks over to the booth where the customers had settled themselves, Heather might have done her a favor, lifting the pressure Mary felt when Gail cast regretful glances in her direction every time they were in company together with the Richmonds and their baby.

The door rattled again. Turning, Mary saw Eric enter the bar, pausing when he caught sight of her. A slow smile lit his face as he looked at her. She smiled back. Whether she and Eric had children or didn't, she had Eric. And that was what really mattered.

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