

The New Girl in Town

by Tanaqui

"You must be the new teacher at the elementary school."

Heather paused, her hand on the packet of cake mix she'd been about to pack into her bag of groceries. It wasn't the first time she'd had a conversation like this in the past ten days. In fact, most of them had seemed to start this way. New Bern and Emporia might neither be very large but she was starting to feel almost like a big-city girl here in Jericho, where everyone appeared to know everyone else—and being a newcomer made you stick out like a sore thumb.

Suppressing a sigh, she turned to look at the speaker and found herself facing a smiling blonde maybe only a few years older than herself, if several inches taller. Though dressed casually, in jeans and high heeled boots that made her legs seem even longer, the woman gave off the air of having just stepped out of the pages of a magazine. Heather suddenly felt distinctly plain and frumpy.

Pushing away the feeling—the other's smile was friendly enough, after all—Heather held out her hand. "Heather Liskinski."

The other woman shook it. "Emily Sullivan. I'm new, too."

The woman at the till ringing up Heather's purchases—Heather had learned on her first trip to the store a week ago that she was the eponymous Gracie—gave a snort and Emily shrugged. "Well, new to teaching. I've been here," she flapped a hand to indicate Jericho, "forever. I just started at the High School. Kind of weird having my friends' kid sisters calling me 'Miss Sullivan', you know? But I'm really loving it." She sounded a little bit like she was trying to convince herself of that—or maybe convince Gracie, by the look she shot in her direction.

Something about the way Gracie hit the till to total up Heather's purchases suggested she wasn't as impressed as Emily wanted her to be. Heather was suddenly very glad there hadn't been any job openings in New Bern. Must be hard starting out on a new career when everyone could remember you running round as a little girl.

"That'll be twenty three dollars and fifty cents, dear. And I'll just pop these in the top for you." Gracie settled the box of eggs on top of the rest of Heather purchases.

"Oh, yes. Thanks." Gracie's words pulled Heather from her introspection and she scabbled in her purse for her pocketbook.

"Hey." Emily had put down the carton of milk she was carrying next to the till; it seemed to be the only thing she was buying. "If you've nothing better to do, maybe we could go for coffee in Bailey's."

"Now?" Heather had gotten her change back from Gracie and was tucking her pocketbook away.

Emily nodded at her, shifting from one foot to the other. "Yes. If you—."

Heather suddenly realized that behind the glamorous front, the other woman was maybe feeling as lost in her new position as Heather was as a newcomer to town. That perhaps she was looking for

someone to confide in who hadn't known her forever and wouldn't spread the gossip around about how teaching was great but also a little scary sometimes. Heather thought for a moment about the piles of boxes still to be unpacked back at the little house she'd rented and how she'd been looking forward to getting the place properly straight—but she'd been at it half the morning already. And she hadn't quite mustered up the courage to try out Bailey's on her own yet; she was sure it was a nice enough place, but walking into somewhere like that when you didn't know anyone was a little intimidating.

"Sure." She smiled at Emily. "I'd like that."

"Great!" Emily beamed back at her as she paid for her milk.

The short walk to Bailey's confirmed that Emily had, indeed, grown up in Jericho: she greeted a couple of people with a nod on the way there, and several more once they were inside. There was a pleasant buzz about the place, without it being particularly busy.

"Hey, Emily." The bartender, an attractive woman in her mid thirties, nodded at Emily as they approached the bar, before transferring her attention to Heather, curiosity evident on her face.

"Hey, Mary." Emily settled herself onto a stool, indicating Heather should put her bag of groceries down on the floor and do likewise. "This is Heather. She's the new teacher at the elementary school." She turned to Heather. "This is Mary. She owns the place."

"For my sins." Mary laughed, a warm sound, and gave Heather a welcoming smile. Probably just business, but it made Heather feel a little less like an interloper among all these people who'd known each other all their lives. "Nice to meet you, Heather. So, what can I get you?"

"Two coffees please." Emily glanced across at Heather to check that was okay and she nodded to say that was fine.

Mary busied herself fetching the drinks. "So where are you from, Heather?"

"Uh, New Bern." Heather was beginning to think she needed to get her life story printed up on a card to hand out; she'd been asked the same questions over and over the last few days.

"Big city girl, huh?" Mary chuckled as she set a cup down in front of her. Heather guessed there was some local joke there that she wasn't privy to. "So, how're you finding Jericho?"

Heather picked up her spoon and stirred her coffee to give herself time to think of an answer. That was another question she'd had to field on a regular basis since she arrived and she was never very sure what to say. She always wanted to say something nice, but she didn't want to sound condescending, as if she found this small, close-knit town quaint or amusing. "Everyone's very friendly," she offered after a moment.

"Nosy busybodies, you mean?" Emily softened the words with a grin. "You got any deep, dark secrets, you can forget about keeping them."

Heather laughed. "No. No dark secrets." She couldn't imagine ever being that kind of person.

A call from the other end of the bar drew Mary away. Heather took a sip of coffee, aware Emily was studying her again.

"Did you always want to be a teacher?" Emily leaned on the bar and propped her chin on her hand.

"Umm, I guess?" Heather put her cup down and folded her hands in her lap. There'd been a while in high school when she'd thought about doing other things, but most people had seemed so surprised when she'd said maybe she wanted to be an engineer that she'd decided she couldn't be smart enough for that. And it wasn't as if she didn't love teaching. She tilted her head and smiled at Emily. "What about you?"

"Not really." Emily gave a wry laugh and her gaze slid away, as if she was embarrassed by her answer. "But I... wasn't doing much with my life and I was kind of over-educated for my job, and then I wanted to get out of town for a while. So... here I am!"

"Here you are, indeed!"

Heather jumped at the words and turned to look at the speaker, who was standing just behind them. She saw a guy around Emily's age, short and with dark brown hair, clad in a plaid shirt and jeans, his thumbs stuck in his belt. He was looking at her in a way that made her feel slightly uncomfortable—maybe it was the intensity with which he was scrutinizing her—even if his smile was friendly enough. "Hello, ladies." Though the remark was clearly intended to encompass Emily as well, he kept his gaze fixed on Heather.

"Hello, Bill." Emily sounded wearily amused, for reasons Heather could only guess at. She expected she'd find out what they were soon enough: Emily was right that it was impossible to keep secrets in a place like this. "Jimmy not with you?"

"Nuh-huh." Bill glanced at her briefly before turning back to Heather. "He and Margaret are doing something with the kids." He shrugged a shoulder in Heather's direction. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your lovely friend here?"

Heather glanced across at Emily, glad for an excuse to break eye contact with Bill, and caught a brief expression flitting across her face that suggested the other woman was about to do something she was going to regret. "Sure. This is Heather. She's the new teacher at the elementary school. Heather, this is Bill." Emily waved a hand in his direction and Heather faced him again. "He's one of the deputies in the Sheriff's Department. Jimmy's his partner. Not used to seeing one of you without the other."

"I can do things on my own." Bill grinned at Heather, and held out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Heather."

"Umm, nice to meet you, Bill." Heather accepted the handshake. When she tried to pull back, he held on. "Umm," she said again, not wanting to appear rude but really wanting her hand back.

Ignoring the gesture, Bill tightened his grip a little. "Heather. That's a pretty name. Goes with your pretty blue eyes."

Heather stared at him in disbelief. A slight snort from Emily confirmed that yes, she probably had heard right. "I, uh...." Sitting up straighter, she tugged her hand away more forcefully. This time he relinquished it.

"So." Bill shifted his feet a bit, standing at ease with his legs apart and his thumbs once more hooked into his belt. "If you're new in town, you'll be needing someone to show you around."

Heather guessed he meant him. It was a friendly enough gesture on the surface, but the way he was looking at her suggested his interest in her was more than neighborly. And she really didn't know him well enough yet to want to commit herself to whatever saying yes might mean. She cleared her throat. "Well, Emily's—."

"And then maybe after I've shown you around, I could buy you a drink...."

He leaned toward her very slightly, clearly eager for her to say yes. She resisted the urge to lean away, while frantically wondering how to say no without offending him. She was sure he was perfectly nice, but he was moving much too fast. While she wanted to make friends in Jericho, she wasn't really looking to make that sort of friend. Not just yet.

"Umm...." Glancing across, she saw Emily had her eyebrows raised questioningly: *need some help?* Heather transferred her attention back to Bill. "Uh, sorry. I've got a lot to do today. Still settling in, you know?"

"Tomorrow, then?" He gave a quick dip of the head, waggling his eyebrows in encouragement.

"Bill!" Emily put a hand on his elbow as if to hold him back. "Leave the poor girl alone!"

"Hey, I was just trying to be friendly." He raised his hands defensively, looking offended.

"Yeah, we know." Emily rolled her eyes, though she sounded amused rather than angry. "Now just hop it, okay?"

"Okay, okay." Bill backed away, his hands raised. "I know when I'm not wanted." With an exaggerated sigh, he turned away and headed over to the pool table.

"Yeah, right," Emily muttered as she watched him walk away. She turned back to Heather. "You okay?"

Heather nodded, drawing in a deep breath and letting it go. "Yes, but... thank you."

Emily shook her head. "No, don't. It was my fault. I should have warned you." She rolled her eyes again. "Not that it would have done much good. Bill's okay, really, once you get to know him but... He doesn't exactly do subtle."

Heather chuckled, relaxing. "I'd noticed. So," she gave Emily a conspiratorial smile, "is there anyone else you should warn me about?"

Emily laughed. "God, where do I start?"

Taking another sip of her coffee as Emily began to fill her in, Heather wondered if she would take Bill up on his offer once she'd gotten to know him better. Or whether—though she was in no hurry to settle down just yet—she'd meet someone else here in Jericho. Meanwhile, she was glad at least that though she might be the only newcomer in Jericho this fall, she wasn't the only new teacher.

Disclaimer: This story is based on the Junction Entertainment/Fixed Mark Productions/CBS Paramount Television series *Jericho*. It was written for entertainment only; the author does not profit from it nor was any infringement of copyright intended.