

Today Yuna Onaga-Fraser wore orange Converse high tops and metallic leggings beneath a purple T-shirt. The busy mother and wife of Chardon's mayor could outshine a peacock.

"Rae, what are you discussing with my employee?" she asked pointedly.

"Nothing. I'm done. I've had my say."

"About what, I'm sure I don't want to know." Dousing the rising tension, Yuna stepped between them. "Quinn, are you all right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Why don't you run down to the coffee shop and grab something to eat? It's lunchtime—you must be starving. Here." She pressed cash into his hand.

"Sure."

When he bolted out the door, the busybody grunted. "The boy was minding his own business when Miss High-and-Mighty stormed in."

Rae blinked. "I resent that."

Yuna blocked her view of the woman. "Let's all calm down, shall we? Rae, why don't we talk in the back?"

Yuna gave a look that needed no interpretation. The bonds of affection only stretched so far. Argue with customers in your best friend's craft emporium, and those bonds might snap.

Taking the cue, Rae marched past the people in line at the cash register and the table of happy tots to the stockroom.

A shipment of boxes crowded the stockroom's aisle. Farther back, Yuna's desk hid beneath stacks of paperwork. Although February was fast approaching, the bulletin board held a collection of Christmas drawings made by Yuna's five-year-old daughter. Kameko's list for Santa, a jumbled scrawl of wishes, was tacked nearby.

Scanning the child's handiwork, Rae suffered a pang of guilt. Yuna carried enough burdens. Between work, parenting, and marriage, she juggled more than her share. She didn't need theatrics in her store—or more fallout from the grief dominating Rae's life.

The dull ache in Rae's chest had become a constant. The sleepless nights and the surges of anger—the storms of the heart came without warning. They came without providing answers to the questions that battered her in a drumbeat of pain. Yet they didn't justify confronting Quinn inside the shop. She should've found a better way to resolve the matter.

Yuna seated herself in the office chair. "I thought you and Quinn had an understanding—you'd stay out of the shop whenever he works." She began swiveling, left and right.

"I didn't know he was working today. I came by to talk to you. It's important."

"What's the crisis?"

"I found more footprints in the snow."

"Why, because you were hunting for them? If you want to trudge around in ten-degree weather, take up skiing."

Rae folded her arms. "You're supposed to be on my side." A debatable point since Yuna refused to take sides, which hurt. "I wish you'd take this seriously."

"I can't. It's stupid. You're not a hound dog. Tracking footprints across your property has become an obsession."

"Hardly," Rae protested, "and this set is new. I found them today, in the backyard. That's not all I found, after I brought Dad home from his doctor appointment."

"You don't have a backyard. You own a forty-acre farm that's going to seed. Why not put the place on the market? Get the house ready to show next month. List in March."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not selling my house."

"Your *farm*," Yuna said. "One of my neighbors is planning to sell her bungalow. Three bedrooms, with a yard that doesn't require a tractor to mow. There's a nice fireplace in the living room. And a fabulous kitchen, in case you or your dad ever learn to cook."

The suggestion of change was unwelcome. Rae had experienced too many shocks, too much loss. For months she'd been walking on shifting sands. Longer, if she was honest. Since the last of her teen years, when she'd learned to keep secrets. Throughout her twenties, when those secrets led to unforeseen complications. And now, into the dark, incomprehensible decade of her thirties.

With agitated movements, she unbuttoned her coat. "Mind telling me what's up with the hard sell?" But she didn't remove the garment—the conversation's unexpected turn made her wonder if she should go. "I'm not here to discuss real estate."

"Who gave you the right to set the agenda for all our crazy talks? They happen constantly, in case you haven't noticed." Yuna paused in her swiveling to cast a pointed look. "Give it some thought, Rae. If you move into town, we'll be neighbors. You can bug me in the evenings. *After* I've finished my workday and tucked Kameko into bed."

"You know I can't move."

"No, I don't. It's a free country." With irritation, Yuna shook the black silk of her hair. The glossy strands danced across her shoulders. "You can live wherever you want."

"Dad has owned the property since before I was born." Asking him to leave was out of the question. The dense forest and the rolling acres were etched with memories—for both of them. Only one of those memories was too ghastly to revisit. The rest were sweet and good, and Rae couldn't bear to leave them behind.

"Your father will adapt. You both will."

Heartache tightened Rae's throat. "Stop changing the subject." Her anger flared, a protective shield. She was safe behind it. "Can we get back on point? Quinn's getting careless with the trespassing. Or bold."

"Quinn has lots of interesting qualities. 'Bold' isn't one of them."

"You may want to revise your opinion." Rae dug into her coat pocket. "I found this."

She withdrew a silk daisy like the ones on sale in the front of the store. Artistic flourishes had transformed the silk flower. Gold paint rimmed the petals. Glitter frosted the leaves. Glass beads were strung down the plastic stem. The beads rattled as she shook the offensive object before handing it over.

Yuna twirled the stem between her fingertips. "Give the kid credit. He does nice work."

"His talent is beside the point. I found it inside the barn."

"Wait. Since when does Quinn sneak into the barn?"

Uncertainty washed Rae's stomach with acid. She didn't check the barn regularly. This morning she'd only walked through after finding Quinn's footprints near the building.

"You're not sure if he's gone inside before today?" Yuna pressed.

"I'm not. He doesn't have to worry about expanding his recon- naissance—or startling animals in the barn. We sold them off right after the White Hurricane."

The famous blizzard sixteen years ago remained a grim footnote in Geauga County's history. The unprecedented winter storm was a har- rowing experience for everyone who lived through it. For Rae and her father, the White Hurricane was especially tragic—the first in a series of events to irrevocably change their lives.

Yuna's brows lifted. "Where was the flower?"

"Tied with florist's wire to one of the stalls. There's so much junk in the barn, it would've been easy to miss. Quinn must've stopped at my place before coming in to work for you."

"He didn't have school today."

"So I gathered, from our brief conversation. I left the house early with Dad. We were gone for hours. I'm sure Quinn assumed I'd never notice the flower. Well, he was wrong." Pausing, she lifted her accusing gaze. "Hit me with the truth, girlfriend. Are you encouraging him?"

"Of course not!"

"Are you sure? Because I want him to stop inserting himself into my life. I get that he's coming onto my property because he has a lot to sort out. Too much, for a kid his age. He has lousy parents, the kind too selfish to help steer him through the loss. I get that, Yuna—I do. But I can't make it my problem."

“C’mon, Rae. You’re blowing this out of proportion.”

The bright sting of tears stopped Rae from readying a defense. Better than most people, she knew just how awful Quinn’s parents were—once, she’d had the misfortune of crossing the Galeckis’ path. Ironically, she’d been the same age Quinn was now, a naive kid without the experience to understand the danger she’d put herself in.

“I see it differently,” she tossed back, aware that she couldn’t justify her actions without telling Yuna about that night. *Which will never happen. I’ll never discuss it with anyone.* Frustrated, she added, “Doesn’t Quinn have anything better to do with his free time?”

“We both agree Quinn isn’t a bad kid. He’s a seventeen-year-old who’s been through too much. Does it matter if he walks around the barn?”

“It matters to me—and to my dad. He’s retired and spends too much time worrying about the . . . reconnaissance. At least that’s how he sees it. If he catches the kid trespassing, he’ll blow a fuse. He’s *not* Quinn’s number one fan.”

“Maybe Connor needs to recharge his social life. Whatever happened to his geriatric homeboys? He hardly sees them anymore. At least you have diversions—working too many hours and driving me to distraction. On weekends, you both spend too much time cooped up in the house.”

Rae bristled. It was bad enough that Quinn worked part-time at the shop. A definite breach of her friendship with Yuna, although the reason for the act of charity was obvious. Yuna had given Quinn the job last November, a few weeks after his unnerving questioning by the PD. The officers had kept him on the hot seat for hours before releasing him—a grueling ordeal for any kid.

Under normal circumstances, Yuna’s charitable instincts were great. Rae also believed in fighting for the underdog. The two women had first grown close while volunteering at Chardon’s food bank, nearly a decade ago. The following year, they’d sealed their friendship by cochairing the committee tasked with expanding the local Meals on Wheels program for seniors.

The Galecki boy was different. Not only because of the startling facts Rae continued to resist. Not only due to the PD’s report, which she’d tossed into a forgotten drawer. Quinn was off-limits. The reasons were complicated, with roots deep in a seedbed of shame too dreadful to share.

A frigid silence overtook the stockroom. Rae wasn’t sure how to break it.

Yuna said, “Tell me what to do to make you feel better. Name it. I’ll do whatever you’d like.”

The comment broke through Rae’s muddled thoughts. Moisture collected at the corners of her eyes. She felt vulnerable and confused. The combination blurred her vision as the office chair groaned to a halt.

Yuna came to her feet. “Should I have a heart-to-heart with Quinn?” On tiptoe, she studied Rae closely. “Persuade him to stop trespassing on your property? It’ll open the door to a conversation I don’t want to have with him. He’s not ready to talk about it, and I’m not either. I’m hurting too, you know.”

“I know.”

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