

Or was that pang just bruised ego? Maybe more than that—a slap to a still-tender part bruised when I'd been rejected by friends, family and lover seven years ago, after I shot Wayne Franco.

But I'd been thinking the same thing about Quinn--that we'd be better off as friends--and it didn't mean there was anything wrong with him. There just wasn't enough of a spark to take the risk. Normally when a potential lover says "let's just be friends," it's really means "I don't actually like you that much", and the promised friendship never materializes. Quinn still sought my company, still wanted to chat . . . and chat and chat. He did want to be friends.

Maybe it would deepen into more someday, when both of us were ready. For now, I could use a friend more than I could use a lover.

Tuesday morning, I was returning from a walk with our only guests--an elderly couple--and saw Emma on the porch, ostensibly filling the bird feeders. That was Owen's job, meaning she was waiting to talk to me about something.

"Did you let Sammi go?" she asked after our guests had gone inside.

"What? No. What'd she say?"

"Nothing. She hasn't shown up, and whatever her faults, she's punctual."

My first thought was that she'd messed up her new schedule and thought she had Mondays and Tuesdays off. But before she left Sunday afternoon, she'd double-checked with me on what time to be in today. "Have you called her place yet?"

"Yes, and I got a mouthful of Janie's cussing for my trouble. She hung up before I could even say why I was calling."

“Maybe the baby’s sick. You know what she’s like. If Destiny’s temperature hits a hundred, Sammi’s off to the hospital. It would be nice if she called to say she couldn’t make it, but I’m sure she’ll be here tomorrow.”

My elderly guests had forgone the campfire Monday night--in early May, I don’t blame them--but they’d helped themselves to the beer and drank more than I would expect for a lovely pair of schoolteachers in their seventies. Fresh air does that to people. I didn’t notice the beer case was empty until late afternoon. We had only two rooms booked that night, and I wasn’t sure either would want the bonfire, but if they did, they wouldn’t appreciate a dry one.

The White Rock LCBO closed at six on Tuesdays in the off-season. I got there at five minutes past, just as the manager, Rick Hargrave, was backing out of the parking lot.

When he saw my pickup tear around the corner, mud flying behind me, he pulled back into his spot, opened the store, and gave me a case of beer to be paid for next time I was in town. You don’t get that kind of service in a big city.

Before I left, Hargrave mentioned that his daughter, Tess, wanted to hold her eighteenth birthday party out at the Lodge next month. Tess was Sammi’s best friend, which reminded me that we hadn’t heard from my errant employee.

The Ernst place was just around the corner. Technically, I should say the “Ernst house,” but that elevated the structure to a status it didn’t deserve. For my first six months in White Rock, I

thought the Ernst place was deserted. No one could possibly live in a hovel so dilapidated that a rumble of thunder would surely reduce it to toothpicks and mortar dust.

Driving by one day, I'd seen a preteen girl walk out and had assumed the local kids were using the place as a hideout. I'd mentioned this to the grocer, expressing my concern that the roof could fall in and hurt them. When he told me that the girl—Sammi—lived there, I'd walked out without remembering what I'd come for.

I parked on the road, walked up the weed lawn and rapped at the door. When it opened, the stench of garbage and unwashed dishes nearly made me gag. Janie parked herself in the gap. If she had once possessed an iota of her daughter's beauty, it had long since vanished. Her leathery skin was enough to make me want to slather on SPF 60 every time I so much as sat in a sunny window. Add a lifetime of booze and cigarettes, and Janie Ernst didn't look like she was about to keel over; she looked like she'd risen from the grave.

"What the fuck do you want, cop?"

The words flew out in a hail of booze-drenched spittle. To someone like Janie, the biggest problem with me wasn't the circumstances surrounding my departure from law enforcement, but the fact that I'd been a cop at all.

"Sammi didn't come to work—"

"And now you're her parole officer?"

"I was concerned because she didn't call. May I speak to her please?"

"May I speak to her please?" Janie mimicked.

"Whoa, that's good. Taking insult lessons from third graders, Janie?"

"Bitch."

“What you say is what you are. Oh, wait, what’s that other one? ‘I’m rubber and you’re glue. Whatever you say bounces off me and sticks to you.’”

The door hit my hand. I grabbed the edge, holding it fast as I leaned inside.

“Why don’t I just come in and talk to Sammi?”

“You got a warrant, cop?”

She threw her weight against the door, catching me off guard. It hit my nose and I jumped back, eyes watering. The door slammed shut.

I stepped off the crumbling cement slab and tried peering through the front window, but grime as thick as a blackout blind blocked my view. A blare of noise from within made me jump. I stepped closer to the door. Gunfire rang out. The television.

I returned to my pickup. Even with the doors closed, I could still hear Janie’s TV. I glanced at the house one last time, but there was no sign of Sammi, so I started the engine and pulled away.

When Sammi came back to work, I’d make sure we worked something out. Sure, she was smart-mouthed, and resentful, but what did I expect? The kid had been raised by dust bunnies.

The next morning, I came in from helping Owen in the boathouse and found Emma stripping the beds, alone.

“Sammi’s not here again?” I said.

She shook her head.

“Did she call?”

Another head shake.

Now this was really bugging me. Sammi had said she didn't want to lose her job, then after we'd come to an agreement on better hours, she stopped showing up--giving me just the excuse I needed to fire her. Something was wrong. Time for another run at Janie.

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Twenty minutes later, I was banging on Janie's front door. I didn't expect her to answer— she wasn't known for getting up before noon. But I was reasonably certain babies didn't sleep that late, so Sammi should have been awake.

“Sammi? If you're in there, open up! We need to talk.”

I jumped down to the dirt patch in front of the window, a garden that likely hadn't been a garden in fifty years. I rapped on the dirt-encrusted glass.

“Sammi! It's Nadia. Look, I'm not here to chew you out. I just need to know if you're coming back to work.”

Silence. I put my ear to the window, but couldn't hear so much as baby gurgling. I rapped harder.

Nothing. I stalked back to the pickup. As I was getting in, I heard a soft voice behind me.

“She's not there. She's gone.”

I turned to see Tess Hargrave. Her face was wan and splotchy, eyes rimmed with red.

“Where is she?” I asked.

Tess cast a nervous glance at the Ernst place. After a series of bounced checks years ago, her dad had stopped serving Janie at the LCBO, so Tess was no more welcome at the hovel than I was, even if she was Sammi's friend.

"Climb in," I said. "Let's grab a coffee."

"I can't. Stock arrived this morning and Dad needs my help. Can I catch up with you later?"

"Lunch?"

She nodded. Again, her gaze flickered toward the Ernst place. "I told Don about it, but he doesn't seem to care."

Staff Sergeant Don Riley was commander of the local Ontario Provincial Police detachment.

"What'd you tell him?" I asked.

"That Sammi and Destiny are gone."

"Gone? When?"

"Sunday night. My dad says—" Her eyes brimmed with tears. "I gotta go. Meet me at Larry's? At noon?"

"Sure, but—"

She sprinted away, long hair flapping behind her. I thought of following, but the animosity between Janie and Rick Hargrave extended to Hargrave's opinion of Sammi, and I knew Tess wouldn't feel comfortable discussing her friend in front of him.

I glanced down the street at the OPP office. Most cops don't have a problem with me. They might not agree with what I did, but they understand how it could happen. Guys in the "public safety" occupations—cops, military, firefighters, paramedics—formed a large part of my lodge clientele. Don Riley and his sergeant, Rudy Graves, were among the exceptions. The first time