

FRANK

(Part of the “Pennsylvania” Series – Story #8)

by

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Frank knew, after that final day that Vince was on the Steelgrave case, after Sonny had been taken to the hospital and Vince was taken to debriefing, that Vince would never go back to being the man he had been. Sonny had gotten *on* him, *in* him. An incorrigible stain. Permanent. Indelible. Making Vince’s body language howl in despair, need, guilt. Making Vince not want to cooperate. Making Vince hire lawyers. Making Vince just plain loony. He wanted to throttle him. He wanted to help him. Something about Vincent Terranova...you just wanted to look him in the eye and say, “Okay, sportshoes, whatever the hell you need, you got it.”

In that regard, and only in that regard, he could wholeheartedly sympathize with the thug. Those plaintive blue eyes, the way of his smile, that smart mouth...Sonny never had a chance. And neither did Frank.

Vince was that big beautiful guy, sorta larger than life, that turned out not only to have a heart of gold, but a brain, too. Scarecrow and Tinman all rolled into one. People couldn’t help themselves. They fell in love with him. They might not know why, or how, they just did. Frank could walk with Vince down a crowded street, or into a busy mall, and watch them all turn and stare in unison, drop like flies in his wake. Vince never seemed to notice.

Frank admitted to himself that while he was on the Steelgrave case he was very narrow-sighted. He saw Sonny Steelgrave through the eyes of a cop, the point of view of the avenger of Stan who had been murdered by Sonny’s brother Dave. For that reason alone the word Steelgrave had become a foul taste in his mouth. It had been an even more foul word for Vince, too, who had begged for the case at Stan’s deathbed. Ah, vengeance was quite contagious...Frank knew this.

So what in hell’s heart had happened to Vince?

Frank had never for one moment suspected Vince of turning. Not for one second. So for the life of him he could not figure out what was happening after Steelgrave was finally caught, taken away by paramedics that fateful day as Vince destroyed key evidence outside the old Bronx theatre – the video Vince himself had set up, dammit! – smashing it to pieces against the wall and the ground, then falling on hard cement to his knees, black

and blue and bloody. Frank prided himself on being quick on the uptake. But this action froze him to the core, had him suddenly picturing Vince in shirts with long ties at the sleeves and sleeping in double padded rooms.

He remembered wanting to yell. Wanting to scream. Wanting to hit something harder than titanium until his hands were numb.

After everything, why in hell was Vince throwing away the case?

He stood in shock looking down at this man he could no longer fathom. When comprehension eluded him, Frank became even more hard-nosed. Unloading his fury on Vince, however, was never even a question. Instinct made him turn and, instead, yell at the cops who were closing in. “Back off. Get away from him! *Get the fuck away!*” The broken video box littered the ground. The black shiny tape from inside now fluttered on the wind in long, tangled strands around them. Everything was so surreal he could barely hear his own voice but he felt the cracks in it, and the strain. And through all that, beside him, something else, too...

He heard Vinnie. Vince. That steadfast agent. The brightest of the superducks. The top graduate of his class at Quantico...

He heard him. He saw him. He *felt* him. And that was it...that was the moment. No thought. No rationale. No arguing.

Simply, he knelt. He put his hand on Vince’s shaking back. He put his other hand against his chest. And he pulled him to him. He remembered two words he said, and only two. “I’m here,” as a broken man sobbed uncontrollably in his arms.

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It was interesting for Frank to note to himself that he had been snared. Ordinarily, he’d never admit to such a thing.

But this wasn’t ordinary. This was Vincent Terranova. No one could ever say there was anything at all ordinary about Vincent Terranova.

Yeah, Frank was trapped, caught now in that Vinnie-wake, one of probably multiple hundreds over the years who’d fallen by the wayside from just a glimpse of rakish, debonair sparkle, a kind of charisma that made you hesitant about anything from then on that couldn’t match it.

It made Frank kind of mad and kind of amazed all at the same time. Frank didn’t fall for charm. Or sentiment. Not ever.

But this was Vince...

The way he found out that Vince had been sleeping with Steelgrave mightily pissed him off. He really really wished Vince had told him...*something*. But no. He had to find out something this personal, this sensitive from that idiot dickweed Daryl, who seemed to enjoy telling Frank this information way too much.

Daryl had smirked. Daryl had pretended to be cool when homophobia was just reeking from that weasel's very aura.

Frank thought of about five different ways to kill him and about ten different ways to dispose of the body. Then he just flat, plain ignored him.

It didn't matter. He was on Vince's side. Always had been. But he didn't really know it deep down until that final day, and that night when he had finally gotten home and dropped instantly to sleep on his couch still dressed in a shirt stained with Vince's blood, Vince's tears.

He thought, *Daryl, if you had a tail it would be so far between your legs in fear right now you would think you were turning gay*. Out loud he said, "Just cut the crap and let me see him." Grudgingly, Daryl let him, still mumbling over and over how Vince was not cooperating, how Vince had put a stain on the organization by sleeping with the mark. "Shut up," Frank muttered.

When he walked into the OCB safe room, Vince didn't even look up.

Frank had not seen him for a full twenty-four hours. He knew the debriefing had not been going well. Vince wasn't giving them any answers they liked. The more he talked, the madder they got. He assumed there was nothing else for Daryl and others to do but let him see Vince. And let Vince call his lawyer.

As soon as he entered the room, Vince turned away.

"So you can just go now...now that you know everything," Vince said disgustedly.

Frank ignored him. He set a pack of smokes and a Coke on the table. Then he said, "But I only just arrived."

Vince did not react, did not look up.

Frank said, "So, what's the plan?"

Vince stayed silent.

"I should know the plan if I'm with you in this."

No reaction.

“Vince? Vince?” He walked to Vince’s side of the table, then hoisted himself up on it and looked down at him. He opened the Coke, took a swig, then handed it to him.

Vince made no move to take it.

“Ah hell, sportshoes. Wake up. It’s me.”

Finally, Vince looked up. All Frank saw in those tired blue eyes was agony. It made him swallow hard. It made something inside him hurt, too, which was funny because he was still the one in control here, wasn’t he?

“So you never told me you got a *lot* too close to this case.”

Vince glanced away, hands curling into fists.

Strangely, the idea of what Vince had done didn’t bother Frank at all. It was more the fact that it was Sonny...*Sonny fucking Steelgrave* of all people!

He kept telling himself Vince was smart. Vince was a regular genius. What in all the levels of Hell had he missed with this one? Sonny Steelgrave. The reputation alone could make guys with balls the size of casaba melons quiver in their mama’s arms.

The worst of the worst. *The baddest man in the whole damn town.* That was Sonny. Through the months he’d kept telling Vince that. Over and over. Don’t forget who he is, *what* he is. And Vince would always scowl and say, “I know. I know.”

But despite it all, it happened. And Frank looked at Vince and thought, *He’s a genius, a goddamn genius. What did I miss?*

He steeled his will, sucked in his gut and prepared himself to say something he figured no one in the past twenty-four hours had said to Vince, to this guy who had dashed everything he’d trained for, everything he believed in against a wall, then buttoned up, refusing to obey, to play anymore, to testify, and then demanded a lawyer.

Frank reached out and clasped Vince’s fist. Vince tried to pull away, but Frank grasped harder, almost yanking. And he said, very quietly, softly sincere, “I’m sorry.”

Then Vince whispered in a rush of breath, “I don’t know what to do.”

“I know.”

Vince took a sharp breath. “You think I’m crazy, right?”

Frank sighed. Looked ceiling-ward. There was a spot on his glasses and he had the urge to clean it but he kept his hand on Vince’s fist. *Steelgrave! Fucking Steelgrave!* “Do you love him?”

Vince said through tight lips. “Yes.”

Frank looked at him steadily. “A lot?”

The dark, shiny head nodded.

“Then maybe you are crazy. But that would be normal, I think.” He kept his voice steady, but his heart thumped nervously; his skin felt hot.

“Well I don’t feel normal.”

“I know. Normal would be you in handcuffs and me yelling at you.”

Vince said, “So why aren’t you?”

“Because we’re doing a new normal now. You and me.”

Vince looked wary. “I’m not testifying.”

Frank leaned down. “Big deal. We have all the intel on Patrice’s conspiracy to kill Steelgrave. And there’s no tape, no body. Even if there was, Steelgrave’d chew his way free on self-defense in five minutes flat anyway! And from *our own evidence!* These dinks filed away tons from you, from this case. You delivered in spades. I’m *on* your side, kid. Don’t let them pump you dry. Smartest thing you ever did? Twenty minutes ago. When you called that lawyer. He’ll be here soon. You talk to him. You tell him everything. Fuck ‘em, Vince. Make *them* work for a change.”

Vince’s brows narrowed. He looked at Frank incredulously.

“I’m not joking!”

Vince hesitated. “I’m just not sure...”

He squeezed Vince’s fist hard. “Whoa! I’ll hold your hand. Whatever it takes. I’m seeing you through this, Vince.”

“But...why?”

Frank rolled his eyes. “Well that’s a downright personal question now, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“Because, Vince,” he said very slowly, as if he were speaking to a child. “I can’t get you out of my mind, that’s why. And hard as it might be to believe, I’m not your enemy. I’m your friend. And that’s what friends do.”

Vince's lower lip trembled, but it seemed like some tension left his body. He said, "But you hate Sonny."

Frank shrugged. "So what?"

"Why would you want to help us?"

"Hey, this is between you and me. You and me, sport. If Steelgrave's along for the ride, well, they make these wonderful things called earplugs, right?"

Vince smirked. But Frank could see his words were having an affect. The watery blue eyes had cleared a little. And Vince's shoulders weren't quite so slumped.

Yes, he could make this work. He wanted to make this work. Vince deserved it. In fact, after everything Vince had done for the organization, he deserved far far better. But Frank couldn't control everything. He could only control himself. And he knew, from this point on, he'd do anything Vince needed him to. He'd do it because he believed in him. He'd do it because it was the right thing to do. And he'd do it because he loved him.

Eventually, everyone got caught in the Vincent Terranova trap, didn't they? It was that outrageously simple.

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Frank got the pizza out of the car, and the six-pack of Bud, then trundled up the narrow stairs to Vince's apartment.

Vince opened the door. He wasn't smiling, but his eyes weren't quite as tired as the last time he'd seen him.

Frank set everything down on the coffee table. They turned on the game and ate until the box was empty.

Frank waited until half-time. He was overcome with curiosity. Vince had had his first visit with Steelgrave in prison. And he wasn't saying anything! He turned to Vince. "So, how'd it go?"

Vince shrugged, suddenly intent on peeling the sticker off his bottle of Bud.

"He saw you, then?"

Vince nodded.

"You all right?"

Vince glanced up, his look more vulnerable now. “I have to be. I will be.” He took a swig from the bottle, tilted his head, stared up at the ceiling. “He walked out on me, though.”

Not really surprised, Frank just nodded. “This is just the first time. I predict he’ll come around.”

“How do you know?”

“I know.”

Vince questioned him with his eyebrows.

“Because it’s you.”

Vince turned away, saying, “I made a pact with myself. I’m going every Friday, no matter what.”

“So. Where’d you put all his things?” Frank knew Vince had gone back to the Royal Diamond, packed up Sonny’s stuff, shipped it off somewhere safe. The IRS didn’t know, no one knew but a few cops Frank had warned to keep their mouths shut. The hotel had been closed within a week.

“Storage.” Vince leaned back and put his legs up on the coffee table, kicking the now empty pizza box out of the way. “Did I tell you I’m buying a house?”

Frank shook his head.

“If I’m going to be working in a six by six cubicle in Pittsburgh, I need a place to stay. The house is nice. Small town. I can afford it. It’s quiet, pretty. No one will bother me there. Or Sonny. If he ever wants to come there some day.”

Frank took a deep breath. He wanted Vince to be happy. He wanted him to smile again. That was all. But he sure as hell hoped that Vince wasn’t expecting too much too soon. To expect anything from Steelgrave... He cut off that thought. Apparently, if Vince wasn’t just completely off his gourd, Frank really, truly did *not* know Sonny Steelgrave at all. Or, for that matter, what the two of them really had been through together.

He hated the demotion Vince had been given. It was such a waste of his talent, his brain. All of this was so unfair, so unbelievably not right.

“Do you hear from your family?”

All Vince said to that was, “Want another beer?” He got up, went to the fridge.

Frank closed his eyes, sighing. He knew Carlotta had cut Vince off. He hoped maybe they had spoken, but he guessed that was just not to be.

Vince came alongside the couch, handing him another beer. Half-time was ending. He sat down and they watched the rest of the game.

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Vince's new house in Pennsylvania was just as he had said, quite pretty. Escrow had been thirty days. Vince was able to move in before Thanksgiving. The first time Frank visited him there, he had been amazed, actually, at how open and airy it felt, and how Vince had decorated it with a sense of style that was clean but also creative. There were no family photos or anything like that, but there were blankets on the couch, some throw pillows, and a quilt on one wall with a design of a tree on it that was quite lovely. It made the place seem warm, homey, even. Wood was neatly stacked by the fireplace. The TV was off to the right. Along the wall by the staircase were wooden shelves filled with Vince's books, everything from King to Castaneda, mysteries, true crime, science fiction.

"Like it?"

Frank nodded. "Quaint." He glanced up. "You going to let me see upstairs?"

Vince shrugged, led the way. Two bedrooms were up there, and a small alcove just right for an office. Nothing had been done to Vince's room yet; it was simple white with a double bed and a dresser. But the other room, Sonny's room... It was obvious he'd spent some time in there.

Frank turned. "He know about this?"

Vince looked down.

"When are you going to tell him?"

"If he gets parole in May..."

"Does he even know you have this place?"

"Not yet."

"What *do* you guys talk about when you visit? Reality or fantasy?" He realized after he spoke that maybe his words were too harsh.

He blinked. "Not much of either. I bring lunch. We play cards, watch TV, stuff like that."

“Vince...”

“It’s okay, Frank. Whatever Sonny wants to do, that’s what I want for him. I’m okay. I’m okay. I really am.”

Frank ran his hands through his hair, then yanked off his glasses and polished them on his shirt. “No. You’re not. But I guess you do what you have to do.”

Vince nodded. “I guess.”

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The next time Frank visited, he asked him point blank. “Tell me one thing... Vince, would he have done all this for you?”

They sat on the couch in front of a roaring fire. Vince put a hand up, rubbed at his eye. “He already did.”

“But he was getting married...”

“Yeah.”

“Well, how much sense does that make?”

“A lot. We were in seriously dangerous territory. It was a good cover...and a good marriage of convenience for him.”

“That what he told you?”

“Yeah, that’s what he told me.”

“But what I want to know is, are you sure he feels...that he wants...that he...” He paused. Added, “That his idea of you two is the same as yours?”

Vince gave him a sad little smile, the first and *only* smile he’d seen from the man since before that fateful day. “You don’t know Sonny.”

Frank agreed wholeheartedly with that. “No. I don’t.”

Vince looked up, his eyes going blank for a moment. “He’s like... everything he does he goes into it head up, full on, with an open heart, never half-assed. If he commits to something, you can bet your whole savings he will damn well get it done. He’s always been generous, too open... actually not suited for the job at all in that way, and yet sometimes absolutely perfectly suited. I dunno.”

“Don’t stop now,” Frank said quietly.

Vince glanced down. His eyes were swimming. “I remember so many times I would go by his office. There was a window off behind the secretary’s side. You could see in. And he’d be sitting at his desk with his fingers pressing between his eyebrows, leaning, just sitting there like he was meditating or something. And I thought, what guy who runs the whole mob in Atlantic City sits alone in their office and thinks? You plan. That’s all. You don’t think in this job. You don’t. You just do. Or you’re dead.”

Vince stopped.

Frank waited.

“It was really hard for me, Frank. I’d tell him stuff to do and he’d actually listen to me. Then I’d remember I was setting him up, and why? If I set him up to make better decisions, would he listen to that? Why don’t they teach that in training school? And dammit, when I tried it, he did. He made better decisions. Sometimes. Trapped men might seem like animals when they’re trapped...but if you undo the chain...”

“Yeah.”

“I...we just...meshed. I never knew I could feel like...*that*. He didn’t just give me stuff, Frank. He listened. He pulled me in. I never felt that way with anyone. Ever. But to answer your question, does he feel what I feel? Let me tell you this. What I feel for him...I thought, wow, but it’s like a flicker of a flame compared to him. Sonny, he’s the whole house on fire. He gave himself to me completely, wholly.” Now Vince’s voice started to shake. “I never felt that kind of intensity off anyone before. And I still went and betrayed him.”

“Well, I guess that certainly and completely answers my question.” Frank let the deep breath he’d been holding out slow, even. But it still sounded like a whoosh.

Vinnie said softly, “I don’t care what it takes. I just want him to be okay.”

Frank felt himself scowl, and reached for his beer.

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He must’ve read Steelgrave’s file twenty times. He didn’t know what he was looking for. Maybe the word “human.” Maybe the word “heart.” But it just wasn’t there.

Now they were eating an early dinner in a steakhouse near Vince’s new abode.

Vince’s words over his uneaten steak still washed over Frank. Finally, Vince had told Sonny the truth, the whole story. About his demotion, the lawyer, finagling Sonny’s tax evasion deal, his new gingerbread house...everything except the room he’d fixed up for

Sonny and getting Sonny's stuff. *"He told me I was fool, that I should've listened to my mother. Then he walked out on me."*

The words echoed. Frank looked up at the unhappy face. This was ridiculous. Sonny didn't want Vince in his life. Sonny was a schmuck. How could that not be obvious?

Maybe Vince was a fool. But that just didn't feel right.

"Are you trying to punish yourself?" Frank suddenly asked.

Vince shook his sleek, dark head. "This isn't about making myself feel bad or good. It's about him," he implored, as if no one had or would ever understand.

"I'm sorry but it sounds like it's about a man who is not ready to come back. Not to you, not to any of it. Vince..."

Vince tilted his head. He made a helpless gesture with one shoulder and a look... Then he glanced down at his steak. "I can accept that. I think..." He sighed. "But I still feel responsible for him...for seeing he's okay no matter what he decides."

"So you're going back?"

Vince's brows narrowed. "Of course."

"Even though he walked out?"

"I'm not going to abandon him, Frank! I already did that once. I won't do it. He was hurting too. And he didn't tell me not to come back. He just said...he just said..."

"What?"

"He said, 'You're not gonna get me to feel guilty over this.'" He paused. "Oh, and he also said, 'Fuck you.'"

"Vince..." Frank wondered how you made someone see when they had blindfolds on. You try to describe what is around you, what you see, but it might not translate. It might not enter their thoughts in the way you intend it too. If Frank painted a picture of Sonny and Vince painted a picture of Sonny he was sure the two would turn out as differently as a canvas of black was to a canvas of white.

He did not want to see Vince hurt anymore. The truth as he saw it and the truth as Vince saw it was different, though. Frank said, "A man walks out. That's pretty clear he doesn't want to see you again. I'm sorry to say that, but it's the golden truth."

Vince took a sip of his beer and sat back. He folded his hands under his chin and stared for a long time at Frank. Then he took a deep breath. "I know what it looks like. I

know. But Frank, I also know what it feels like. What I told him, everything, it was just too much in that moment. It overwhelmed him. He's used to being in charge. He's used to control. This is...everything is out of his control. It's all mixed up. Knowing what I've lost...he can't face that anymore easily than he can comprehend everything he lost."

"You are putting words in his head."

Vince shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe. But I know him."

Frank snorted. He had to give Vince that one.

Vince added. "And I'm going back. And he will see me."

"I'd make a bet with you but I'm tapped out," Frank said.

Vince smirked, then gave him that blue-eyed sheepish look that always made Frank's stomach flip, or made him mad...take your choice. "You wouldn't bet against me, would you, Frank?"

Frank felt all his muscles soften at Vince's so innocent query. He leaned forward. He had no smart words left. "Once maybe." He gave Vince a curt smile. "But now? Not on your life, sport. Never."

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The next week, Frank and Vinnie were eating subs on the couch and watching NASCAR.

Frank kept eying him.

Vinnie had offered nothing about his next visit to Sonny after Sonny had walked out on him.

"Okay, I'll bite already."

"Huh?"

"Vince, did he see you or not?"

"Yeah."

"Just like usual?"

Vince frowned. "Yeah. He's definitely not eating enough, Frank. He practically came running back."

"For the food...?"

“Yeah. For the food.” Vince’s eyes got that watery look again.

“What?” Frank leaned forward a little. Lettuce pieces fell from his sandwich and onto the wax paper. “Didn’t he say anything?”

“Yeah. He said, ‘You came back.’ Like he really believed I wouldn’t. Then he kinda... fell...against me. But he still wouldn’t let me touch him. He pushed me away.” Vince pressed his lips tight, then added. “It’s gonna be okay. It is.” He nodded as if to punctuate that truth.

Frank felt his lungs constrict as he tried to envision what Vince had described, much as he disliked the vision. Then he said softly, “He didn’t come for the food, Vince.”

Vince looked at him, then looked at the ceiling. “He was really hungry, Frank.”

“Yeah, so you tell me.”

*

Frank had thought about visiting Steelgrave himself. But he knew the man would never see him. There was really no way to ever know him except through Vince’s eyes, and through incomplete records at the office.

Not knowing what his best friend was into was nerve-wracking. What if Vince was just completely out of his mind...not rational in any way about this? He didn’t want to see him hurt, but he didn’t know what to do about it, either.

There was no one else to talk to. Any of Steelgrave’s former friends were mafia or connected themselves. They’d never meet with him. And the family was all gone or dead. There was a Tracy Steelgrave in California, Dave Steelgrave’s daughter. There were a couple times he had thought about calling her. But in the end, he couldn’t. It had felt all wrong. As if that might actually make things worse. And he couldn’t do that to Vince. He wouldn’t.

But it killed him that there wasn’t something he could do...learn. He went to the library and pulled up old newspaper articles about the mob in Atlantic City hoping to maybe find something that wasn’t in the OCB records. He scoured the pages for any photos. He found a few grainy ones of a younger Sonny, then more recent ones of Sonny and his new “soldier Terranova”, taken from behind on the courthouse steps, but nothing more.

Back at the office he studied the few candid photos that were in Steelgrave’s file. There were no mug shots because Sonny had never been booked after any of his very few arrests. He looked at the tilt of the head, the eyes, and saw only arrogant challenge. He stared and stared until the photos went blurry. Then he blurted into the empty air, “Give me something, dammit. Something to go on here!”

But the photos were mute. All he saw was the thug. The criminal. The cold.

What did Vince see? What had happened between them that could cause that...that sociopathic mob-king to do or be anything but the hood he was? What was it? A couple of bi-curious secret wrestling matches on a king-size mattress and exchanged smiles? That was ridiculous to even think about.

But he did think about it. And he thought of his field agent, the strangers who turned and stared as he passed by, the strength of him, the intelligence. And he understood, even if he didn't want to, how it might be far too easy for even the devil to fall in love with Vincent Terranova.

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Of course Frank was nervous. He tried not to be. He'd deny it if anyone asked him. It infuriated him that Steelgrave could have any kind of power anymore, let alone the power to make Frank nervous. But this visit...this was not going to be the same. None of his visits to Vince were ever going to be the same again now that Steelgrave was out of prison, now that Sonny had moved in to Vince's cute little cupcake of a house.

He was and he wasn't surprised when Vince told him Sonny had decided to stay with him. He fumed a little over it wondering what kind of friend he was that he wasn't happier for him. At that point, he had toyed with the idea of letting Vince go, of just tapering off the visits, slowly cutting him loose, talking to him less and less until there was no more contact. Vince didn't really need him anymore, he told himself.

But when he tried to get out of this weekend's visit, Vince had protested loudly. "Frank, please. Come."

"But you don't need me there. You're just getting him settled in..."

Vince had interrupted. "Don't do this! Please. I can't lose you, lose our friendship. I won't let that happen!"

"Ah, sport, you're not alone anymore..."

Vince interrupted again. "What does that have to do with anything? You're my best friend."

"No. He is." He tried to sound factual, casual, but the truth was he felt something inside him stab as he said those words.

Vince was silent for a moment. Frank could hear him swallowing. He could practically hear him thinking. Finally came the words: "I want you in my life."

Frank thought, *Why?* But he didn't say it. Now the stabbing pain ceased and a warmth centered in his chest. "It can't work, pal."

"Are you saying I can't have both of you? In my life? At the same time?"

"That's probably what I'm saying."

"Then we'll meet, somewhere outside the house. We'll still get together every Saturday. I'll do anything it takes, come to your place, whatever."

That was when Frank realized he was being very selfish. Mean, perhaps. And stupidly immature about this. Vince was only trying to do right...by both him and Sonny...but Frank and maybe Sonny, too, was canceling out his efforts. He took a deep breath. "You don't have to go to such lengths. Vince, if you really want me there, you know I will be." He couldn't believe he'd said it. He did *not* want to see Steelgrave or ever, really, have anything to do with him.

But his gesture was rewarded by a big sigh over the phone. Vince Terranova letting out his exasperation, his stress, his anxious love for Frank. And yes, that was how Frank sometimes thought of it. Vince's love. Anxious. Desperate. And, yes, sweet, too. Just pure Vince wanting to include Frank in his paces, his thoughts, his heart.

Why had he thought Vince's feelings would change once Sonny was in the picture? One of the reasons Frank liked Vince was because he wasn't shallow. He was the steadfast type. Big heart.

Frank was touched, to say the least. But he had to ask, "Have you told Sonny I'm coming?"

"Uh... he knows I see you often."

"That's not an answer."

"No, I haven't told him yet."

"Sport, tomorrow's Saturday. That's less than 24 hours. Get to it."

"Yeah."

"Trying to avoid a scene, huh?"

"He'll be okay with it," Vince said softly.

"Oh yeah, I'm sure you're right about that." Sarcasm dripped. Frank found himself chuckling without smiling. It was, actually, a very comical situation on the surface. He

pictured the three of them sitting and chatting and watching a game on TV. Surreal. Ridiculous. In fact, outrageous.

“I can handle him.”

“So you tell me.” Frank grunted his laugh, still not smiling. This was incredibly insane. He didn’t want to think about it anymore.

When they hung up, Frank realized with a scowl that there really was no way he could ever get out of this.

Now he pulled up Vince’s driveway, noticing that Vince’s car was gone. He usually parked it there, not in the garage. He got out slowly, watching the house. The door opened. Vince stood at the threshold.

Frank squinted, unsure if he wasn’t just seeing things, but no, this was real. Vince was smiling. For the first time in over eight months, Vince was actually smiling.

He grabbed Frank in a big hug and lugged him into the house.

It made Frank feel a little relieved in his secret nervousness, but still he caught himself glancing around. Where was he? That other guy? That thug?

Vince noticed him looking and said, “He’s not here.”

Frank glanced at him.

Vince said, “He went to the store.”

“Well...” And that was all he could think to say at the moment.

“It’s okay, Frank. You’re welcome here. He’s okay.” Vince grinned. “Maybe a little nervous, but...”

“Him? Nervous? Yeah, right.”

Vince took Frank’s coat. “Sit down.” They went to the couch. Vince sat next to him. “Really, it’s all cool,” he said softly.

Frank just stared at those open blue eyes, shook his head and said, “You’re a lunatic, you know that.”

Vince looked really good today. His smile did not leave his face. He shrugged. “Maybe.”

“I guess we don’t even have to talk to each other if we don’t want to,” Frank said casually.

Vince nodded. Then the blue eyes misted over. The smile stuttered. “I’m so glad you came.” There was a tremble in that voice. He just stared at Frank, his eyebrows lowered.

Frank’s heart shuddered. He forced himself to smirk. “Don’t even think twice about it.”

“But I do,” Vince replied. “It’s a really big deal. And I need to thank you.”

Frank sighed, leaned back. “No you don’t. You don’t ever have to thank me.”

Vince smiled again, and there was a glow on his face as if it was all a stage and someone had just turned on the spotlight. He knew that glow was for Sonny. But he also thought maybe a part of it was for him. He hoped, anyway. Because truly Vince had been a good friend in return. It wasn’t all one-sided. Vince was a good listener. Funny and smart. He could’ve done worse in the pal department, that was for sure. And he admitted to himself he would have been pretty damn lonely if he’d let Vince go.

“So how are things? Okay? Good?”

Vince’s eyes sparkled. “Yeah. Good.”

Frank nodded. *That good?* But he didn’t say it. “So he just agreed to stay? Just like that?”

“Sort of,” Vince hedged. “Not really at first. He had to get used to all this first.”

Frank nodded. “It’s been, what, all of two days?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think it took that long.”

Vince just smiled again.

“But hey,” Frank added, “What’s not to like about this place? It’s peaceful. And you know what? It smells really good.”

Vince’s lips pressed together in amusement. “He said the same things.”

“Yeah?” That bugged him a little, but not that much. “Well, you just have good taste in living arrangements, that’s all.”

“So how’re you doing?” Vince asked.

And the conversation turned to daily grind for awhile. As they chatted quietly, they heard Vince's car pull up. A car door slammed. In a minute, the front door flew open and a man laden with bags and packages entered.

Frank watched, not moving a muscle. For a moment, he almost did not recognize Sonny Steelgrave. Skinnier. Jeans. A too-small short-sleeved beige t-shirt stretched tight over his chest, the sleeves pulling against surprisingly tan biceps. *How uncharacteristic*, Frank thought. The dark hair was a bit longer and wind-tousled making him look downright boyish. Where was the mob-king? The gangster? The prisoner? The thug? Hell, this was just a boy! Burdened with packages, flushed, looking slightly put out.

The last time he'd seen this guy, he'd been black and blue, the eyes swollen, the mouth cut and bleeding. He remembered pounding on his chest. He remembered trying to breathe for him, that feeling of strange detachment he got in the face of death believing for awhile that the man was truly dead, was never coming back, but then seeing that forlorn look on Vince's face and redoubling his efforts. Sonny had been such a mess. Frank hadn't thought of that in a long, long time. Now the images superimposed themselves over the man standing in the doorway.

Sonny turned and that was when Frank saw more of the former man. The slightly creased eyes, the dusting of silver in closely trimmed sideburns, the proud, up-turn of the chin. "Frank McPike. Long time no see."

When Frank heard his voice, though, there was no mistaking it. That thin New York accent, that gravelly edge.

"Well hell, Steelgrave, never thought I'd see you again." His heart pounded but he moved not a muscle. Out the corner of his eye he could see Vince...what?...grinning? Damn him!

Sonny's lips curved, but not really in a smile. He turned and moved into the kitchen. They could hear him in there rustling bags and packages, putting things down. When he came back out, he said something about more stuff in the car.

Vince said, "Need any help?"

Sonny replied, "Nope."

Frank watched the slim, tanned form walk through the front door, leaving it open. Sonny was the same. But he was also so different. Frank turned back to Vince. "Christ!" Then he started to laugh, suppressing it. Or maybe it was shock he was trying to suppress. "I don't know if I would've recognized him. He looks younger. So...well...not the hard-ass I brushed elbows with back then."

Vince leaned back. "That's how he's always looked to me. Even in a suit that cost two grand."

“Vince...”

Vince shook his head. “Frank, I should’ve told you more...everything about the case. About him. But I couldn’t. I didn’t know how.”

“No worries now,” Frank said quietly.

“If I told you how human he was...how he was nice to puppies like the one you adopted...how he only hated those who double-crossed him...you wouldn’t have believed me. You wouldn’t have.”

But he did terrible things, too, Frank added silently to himself.

Just then, Sonny came back in carrying more bags slung on his forearms and in his hands. He kicked the door shut and moved off into the kitchen.

Frank winced. Glared. Frowned. Said gruffly, “Okay. Yeah. You’re probably right. I wouldn’t have believed you. But I was put through the ringer by...his organization...”

Vince leaned forward. “Are you talking about that time with Karen?”

Frank tried not to remember it. He’d been kidnapped by Sonny’s henchmen. Tortured within an inch of his life to give up the Federal agent he had undercover. To give up Vincent Terranova. Vince and Karen had rescued him; later Karen had been killed. Frank looked away.

“I told you,” Vince said gently. “Sonny knew nothing about it. It’s not something I believe. I know it for a fact. Sid set it up behind Sonny’s back. The guys thought it was Sonny’s order because Sid lied and told them Sonny ordered it. Sonny was so pissed. He gave Sid a black eye. Sid had Karen killed. Sonny understands the game, but that game? It was a fool’s plan. He sanctioned none of it. It was nothing to do with him.” Vince sighed and folded his hands, staring at them. “He was careful and cool. He didn’t fuck with cops. It was a rule with him. Even if he didn’t like cops, he didn’t want the consequences. He was never out to get you or Karen. He hated Sid and he despised him even more after Sid kidnapped you and killed Karen. Maybe Sonny hated you, but he didn’t want you dead. Frank...”

Frank looked at Vince, the blue eyes, the smooth jaw, the thick dark hair swooping over his forehead, and tried not to think of anything else. He looked at him and realized with a kind of falling feeling that he’d do anything for him. He didn’t like it one bit, but he couldn’t change that fact.

Vince said, “It’s the circumstances Sonny was in that made him hate you and you hate him.”

He nearly whispered, a partial lie, a partial truth because Vince was, if anything, pretty convincing. "I'm not stupid. I do understand everything you're saying."

Vince kept staring at him. Almost pleading.

"I get it," Frank said again. Then in a tone he rarely used, deliberately soft, "I know you saw things the rest of us missed. Okay? So don't be defensive today of all days. I'm not here to judge you, Vince."

Vince sat back. Looked a little shocked. Then entirely too grateful. "Thanks."

Not wanting to draw out the moment, Frank rolled his eyes. Then he said, "You got any beer?"

Vince smiled. "We got the best. Just for you." And he was up and into the kitchen almost faster than Frank could blink.

Frank shook his head. He had to smile. *We got the best. Just for you. 'We?' Yeah. Right.*

Frank heard murmurings in the kitchen. Then Vince returned with two green bottles. "What's this?"

"The good stuff," Vince answered, and handed him a cold Heineken.

Later, about an hour later, Sonny finally came out to join them. Frank forced himself to stay relaxed, but he was up for it. For anything. If Sonny said anything to him, he could hold his own. His mind was preparing the sarcastic quips even as he watched Steelgrave amble up and sit down at the far end of the couch. He caught Frank's gaze and held it. Yes, Frank was up for this.

Sonny said, "You don't have to tell me you're not overly happy about seeing me here."

Frank was surprised when he heard no sarcasm in Sonny's voice. "Well, Steelgrave, you couldn't be more wrong."

Frank leaned forward and grabbed his beer from the table. He took a swig, held onto the bottle. It was damn good beer. He had seen Sonny bring it in from the car. He couldn't deny that Sonny had bought the stuff, that right this very moment he was drinking Steelgrave beer on a Terranova couch while the two of them stared at him as if he were a ticking bomb.

"Good stuff," he said casually. He sighed, glancing at Vince, who was trying not to smile, then back at Sonny who sat with his beer balanced on his thigh. For the first time he could actually look at Sonny without the background thoughts of doing his job. This allowed him to notice things on another level. Sonny had the intensity of a hurricane

constantly spinning. It was almost unnerving to stare at him for very long. There was just something about him, some energy that flexed and careened. It seemed to make the room sparkle and it made Frank distinctly perplexed. He remembered having the thought, when walking with Vince through any public place, that people didn't stand a chance around Vincent Terranova. He toppled empires and created stares wherever he walked. He remembered thinking Sonny hadn't stood a chance. But now he was revising his thinking. In the face of Sonny's almost effortless hot force, maybe it was Vince who'd never stood the chance.

Something in his heart felt far too soft for his comfort. Vince. He was doing this for him. For his good friend. He could never let himself forget that. He said, "For eight months this man here, who is my very good friend, has never once smiled in my presence. Today I don't think he's stopped. That's something." And he held his beer up as if in a kind of salute, and drank some more.

It was the truth. Whatever Sonny did for Vince, he couldn't deny it was somehow right. Somehow true. It was in a way he still failed to comprehend something Vince needed. He wasn't required to understand it. There were things that simply did not make sense but they still existed. You didn't understand them. They just were.

He looked at Vince and Sonny. Sitting on the couch. Dressed in jeans. Fervent but nonchalant. Looking quite a bit younger than their true years. Drinking Heineken. He blinked. And the picture of the two of them became etched into his brain. And very slowly it became a reality. A reality he could almost accept.

*

After that first visit, things got a tiny bit easier. He visited again, almost every week, and while he and Sonny stayed wary nothing overtly impolite ever happened between them save a few witty or sarcastic remarks now and again.

Frank was a little surprised when Vince quit his job. He did not ask why. He accepted it. In fact, he had expected it. Vince had won that job as a right. But it had nothing to do with his heart...not anymore. And he always automatically figured Sonny had money stashed. Steelgrave wasn't that stupid. He was a businessman. A businessman, a good one, always had back ups. So Frank wasn't worried about Vince missing mortgage payments. He said nothing about it.

When Sonny landed in the hospital after some kind of bad anxiety attack during a police raid on Vince's home, he dutifully visited. In support of Vince, of course. But Sonny had looked so tired in that hospital bed, so defeated. It was odd to see that ever-shifting fire dimmed. And it made Frank feel uncomfortable. Frank knew that look. No one should ever look like that...like Frank himself looked in the mirror after a bad day in the field. No one, not even Sonny Steelgrave, deserved that kind of torment.

From his hospital bed Sonny had actually turned to him, showing vulnerability that only Vince ever talked about seeing, and asked him what he could expect from the cops. His posture said he was sure he'd be sent back to prison. And Frank couldn't fault him for that fear. Sonny was still on parole. Too many people out there would very much like to set Sonny Steelgrave up. Too many people. But Frank found himself automatically reassuring him. Frank had stepped in in a professional status earlier that day, thrown his weight around as was his nature, his talent, and insisted the local officers lay off Vince and Sonny. He'd found out things he had not been aware of, things Vince had never told him, how Vince and then Sonny, too, had been harassed by a bully cop, how that cop was unpopular with many people and had had complaints against him by half a dozen other civilians, including Vince himself. His gut told him neither Vince nor Sonny had had anything to do with that cop's death. So he felt great when he got to chew out the commander who'd ordered the raid.

Steelgrave. The name was going to haunt both of them for a long, long time. Maybe forever. Frank had wondered why they didn't take new names, move further away. Maybe it would eventually have to happen. But he didn't want to think about it because he liked seeing Vince. He liked visiting. He did not want to see him move. Not yet.

*

One visit that stood out in his mind occurred during a late fall storm. The snowfall from the previous night had almost prevented Frank from driving in that day, but he'd made it, and he'd been warmly welcomed into the Vince-Sonny fold by none other than Steelgrave himself at the front door, solicitous, charming, steering Frank to a warm place by the roaring fire they had going in the front room.

The two of them, Vince and Sonny, seemed very easy with each other, but at the same time in an almost dangerously teasing mood. They quarreled over a house Sonny had not told Vince he still legally owned. And Frank felt for one of the first times how focused their world—the world of the two of them—had become. Even with the tension Sonny and Vince's tiff left in the air, Frank still felt entirely left out. Nothing existed for the two of them but each other. Even in the tension, they had eyes only for each other. The game was on, the TV turned up, but neither one really watched. Frank was a trained observer. He saw the intensity—really saw it—between them. And when he caught them kissing in the kitchen, even though Vince was furious with Sonny, the flush on Vince's face was not from anger. And when Sonny walked out of the house and Vince quipped that he hoped he froze his ass off, Frank decided that Vince had no idea how much affection was in his voice when he said it.

All that tension, all that intensity. It was making Frank crazy. He felt like a third wheel, caught in the middle. He felt almost invisible, extraneous. Whatever was going on between them, there was no room for anyone else. Not right now, anyway. It was a flame, a fire, a heat that Frank had no business wading in. These two had hit some level that made Frank feel like a real intruder that day. He had no sweet notions of voyeurism,

and he knew he had to find an excuse quickly to leave before they just dropped to the floor right before him and had it out.

The bad weather was his perfect excuse. He told Vince he didn't want to be driving when the next storm hit. And it was coming. Plus, he used his son Drake as an excuse. He made up a story about promising to be home in time to have dinner with Drake. Vince had whined quite properly, wanting him to stay. Frank was polite to him. But dammit he was leaving!

When he finally got out of there and into the cold air, he could breathe again. As he got into his car he looked back at the house. Could it be that the windows were actually steamy?

He gave a grumbly laugh as he drove away, and turned up his music as loud as it would go.

*

He saw them again two weeks later on his birthday. They met him at a local steakhouse. When they walked in, both men turned heads, but they seemed not to notice.

It was a fact that together they exuded an almost thrilling, fiery exuberance. They had both been powerful men. That did not just wear off. But as the fever hit the air, it did not really expand much further than each other. Still, heads turned as they brushed fresh snow from their shoulders and hair. They both dressed impeccably. Neither one was a slob. Vinnie wore black jeans and a black leather wool-lined jacket with a white shirt underneath. Sonny had on dark brown cargo pants with lots of pockets, a black pullover sweater, and a black thick jacket with a black and red striped scarf slung around his neck. They were a handsome pair. Who wouldn't look? There was no way to easily peg them as a couple, either. Neither of them afforded any effeminate mannerisms. It wasn't natural to them, two tough guys from Brooklyn and the Bronx. Nor did they do much public touching, save Sonny occasionally brushing Vince's arm or back the way he always had back in Atlantic City.

Frank found it interesting to ponder things like this. How in the world had it come to this? How was he having a birthday dinner with, of all people, these two guys?

When they sat down after removing their jackets, Vince handed Frank a white envelope. In it was a birthday card, pretty typical, with a picture of a cake with candles on the front. Inside just said, "Happy Birthday," and Vince had signed it. Sonny had not, but Vince had put Sonny's name underneath his in his own handwriting. Frank thought it amusing.

Inside the card was a long, folded piece of paper. Frank unfolded it. It was a bumper sticker. It read: "IT'S BEEN LOVELY BUT I HAVE TO SCREAM NOW."

Frank looked at Vince. Vince grinned.

“Perfect,” Frank said. “That’s going to look exceptionally normal on *my* car.”

Sonny said, “I told Vinnie to get the one that said: ‘DON’T LOOK NOW BUT THE FEDS ARE FOLLOWING ME’ but he decided on that one.”

Strangely, Frank thought Sonny’s selection might actually be funnier. Sonny squinted at him, staring intensely. Frank glared as he tried not to smile. Then Sonny said, almost too soft, “Well, anyway, Happy Birthday. Dinner’s on me. Order whatever you want.”

Out the corner of his eye, he saw Vince glance affectionately toward Sonny.

Frank looked down, opened his menu. He could still feel Sonny’s stare. But, after all this time, it really wasn’t such a bad thing.

*

(end)