

(warning: violence, rape, but NOT between the two main characters, Sonny/Vinnie, slash, Wiseguy, 13,737 words)

THE HUNTER

by

Natasha Solten

*“My sign is vital; my hands are cold”
--the Killers*

SONNY

The maple-autumn air stirred. An owl maybe, invisible silhouette against a too-black sky. I couldn't be sure, but I imagined it out for the hunt, gliding under the dark of the moon unseen, unheard, swooping, diving, claws raking fur, skin, blood. Such a small thing. Such a huge thing. The hunt. The exhilaration of the catch.

For the past hour, I had not moved from the lounge chair. My sweater barely kept me warm. I don't remember putting it on. Maybe Vinnie gave it to me earlier, before I headed out into the yard, into the shadows. Any time with shadows is my favorite time of day.

The sweater was bulky. I hated the weight of it on my skin. It made me feel too large, too unkempt. Hell, I had always gone for the smooth silks, the suits and scarves of high society. Yeah. The crystal goblets filled with endless old wines, the more expensive the better just so I could see the quintuple-digit bill at the end of the night and feel smug about paying it – with cash – like it was nothing to me because rooms of money filled my life, endless stacks of it. That was my success, my vindication from a poor childhood.

But now, who cared? It could've been rotting paper that filled my rooms. Or rather, the rooms of the bank vaults in Switzerland that had all my fully-documented identities on them. I didn't care. Six digits. Seven. What could money buy that I didn't already have? What could cash do to save me?

Even Vinnie had probably grown tired of the weird guy that shared this place with him, the simpler, more glib, distracted version of me who'd all but run away, exited the play.

Vinnie had insisted on coming with me. Extended vacation. Rest. A new environment. A place to find new beginnings, or say good bye to old, unglamorous endings.

The owl hunted. I sat. Growing smaller. Insignificant. Transparent and light enough to be its prey.

I wished I was its prey. I wanted to feel its wings sweep me, its talons work their way into my back, my neck. The warmth of feathers and my own blood coating me would feel like...something...anything. Better than this “couldn’t care less” mood.

What would happen would be this: the owl and I would merge, become one, and I would soar. I would trade souls with it, become the hunter, the soaring, spoiled cock-of-the-walk again.

I would be saved.

But that didn’t happen.

I heard the sliding glass door open. Slow, soft footsteps on damp grass. An almost whispered, “Sonny?”

That tone of his meant, more specifically, *It’s cold. It’s getting late. Come in.*

He put his hand on my arm but I could barely feel it through the bulk of the sweater. There was a scent on the air like fine resin and flame, candles burning beyond sight.

Vinnie offered a hand and pulled me up even though I could get up by myself, of course.

He had turned down our bed. It was soft, clean, warm. Candles burned. The refreshment on the nightstand was brown and glowing in square, clear-cut glass. Whiskey. He knew it helped me sleep. He never said, but he knew.

Our bed. We shared it. I don’t know why. It was for sleeping only. What else would we do? Our shadowy love was not yet complete, like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces mangled or missing. Vinnie only slept with me because our second night here he said, eyes downcast, “Please,” and I shrugged and said, “Okay.” He tried to make me think it was his idea, all alone, all by himself, but he’d seen me from across the room, tossing, shivering, then all too silent and sleepless that first night we spent here. He asked me if I was in pain. I wasn’t. It wasn’t that. But the next night he came to me.

From the moment I met him, Vinnie always came to me. Lent a weight, a support, a structure I had always needed...wanted. It didn’t matter that he was on a job, that he was keeping secrets, that he was there to destroy me. He still came. He still lent. He still built a structure.

That second night when he said, “Please,” he put his arms around me from behind. I would never deny we were close enough for that. We simply weren’t on the traditional lover’s path. I didn’t push him away. It felt too good. My hyper-nervous shaking stopped. And he’d slept with me ever since.

Now he was taking off his robe, hanging it on the coat rack by the closet as I sat on the edge of the bed still dressed, sipping my whiskey, feeling it burn away the fringes of my unease or hollowness or whatever it was, making me feel a little melted around the edges. That was nice. Always nice.

And then there was Vinnie in his blue silk shorts...really nice. That thick dark hair reflecting every candle flare the way dark windows of night reflect car lights, starlight, moonlight. The beauty of him was like a tender spot inside of me that stung and scraped and tingled. There was nothing I could do about it.

He was telling me a joke. I didn't hear it but I gifted him with a smile just because he was Vinnie and because he would do that for me, tell me a joke even if I hardly laughed anymore. Even if we weren't in Atlantic City anymore. Even if we both seemed to be people other than ourselves.

I stared at him. He was like tomorrow and diamonds and the crown prince all in one, his square brow, his blue topaz eyes, his lips curved up as he finished his joke, his proud chin, his broad shoulders. His olive skin was like warmed glass. I knew that. I'd touched him before, his arms, his chest...but that was all that ever happened. Always, I would roll away. Every time.

I couldn't tell him why I was nervous to do more because he wouldn't understand. In fact, he would misunderstand. He would think it was because of what happened to me, because I was so badly hurt. But really it was because of him, because of what *he* went through, what he had to see, and because I loved him just too damn much. If I let myself go with him, there would be no turning back for me. Ever. I wasn't sure I was ready for that. I wasn't sure he was ready, either. I wasn't sure. And that was another problem. I used to be sure about everything, including Vinnie. But now I couldn't know what he was thinking anymore. Used to be I could read him so clear. We were that close. Psychic twins. Not now.

Best to leave it be. Yeah, best.

And tonight was no different for me even though something different did happen. As usual, Vinnie got under the covers. I undressed in the candlelight, my back to him, and left my clothes on the floor...something I never ever used to do. I used to be neat, tidy. I climbed into bed wearing only my black shorts and tank undershirt.

Vinnie touched my cheek with his hand. Sometimes he did that. So warm, so Vinnie. But what was different was that he leaned in close this time, real close, and kissed me. For the first time. He'd never done that before. I know he'd wanted to. But he hadn't. Until now. He just leaned in and did it. He was tentative. His lips were a little hard and unsure, like he was afraid I'd shove or turn or bite.

The heat of him, that soft breath. I wanted. I so wanted...

But something hurt me when he did it. A strange uncertainty. In my stomach, low. A shooting pain. A knife. A burn-scar re-opened.

I started that nervous shake. Fuck...I was being so stupid. It was Vinnie. He's so perfect. And he's definitely *not* scary.

Vinnie pulled back, lips pressed tight into a sheepish line, and said, "Okay, Sonny." And it sounded like his throat was filled the way reverence and awe will make you feel choked...breathless.

I loved that tone too much. "Fuck."

I shut my eyes hard, turned away onto my side. I felt his arm cover me and the shaking stopped after awhile. His warmth beside me seeped into me until I slept.

*

VINNIE

Vinnie thought of that wretched day, that disaster of a day, that abomination of a day as...the Incident. He tried not to think of it, but that didn't work. Trying not to think only made him think of it more, every day, every hour, every time he looked at Sonny.

It was hard to describe how the memory made him feel. Like his heart was a hollow cave. Like he was one step away from cardiac arrest. Like he was balanced on a tightrope across an ancient and vast abyss and he couldn't go forward and he couldn't go back.

And yet, at the same time the memory made him more proud and in awe of Sonny than he'd ever felt before. The Incident proved to him that Sonny was the most alive person he'd ever known. A person who never gave up. The person who saved him.

Every time he looked at Sonny the memory flashed across his mind. It never played out in real time or anything. It only took seconds. But it was all there. That memory. Whole. Stunning. Yet also for its tragic violence: bleak. Poison.

Sometimes he felt like the Incident was all his fault...even though Sonny told him it wasn't. Sometimes he thought he hadn't moved quickly enough, forcefully enough, determined enough. Sometimes he thought he'd failed in the most important moment of his life to change the outcome, to change fate.

But that was all untrue. There was nothing different he could've done. He'd been over and over it. The only way things might've concluded in another way was if Sonny hadn't been "Sonny" and Patrice hadn't been "Pat the Cat" and Vinnie hadn't played the role of

disgruntled soldier ready to foist a betrayal on two of the most powerful mobsters of the eastern seaboard.

Patrice had been the one to catch Vinnie at his bigger game. Patrice had figured it out days or perhaps only hours before their supposedly secret meeting. Patrice had learned from good intel that Vinnie was a Federal Agent. Instead of telling Sonny, instead of teaming together with Sonny to get rid of the cop, Pat decided to get rid of them both, Vinnie the Fed, and Sonny the weak link at the top of the chain of command of organized crime who'd allowed that Fed into his operation to begin with.

At the meeting with Patrice, Vinnie had had a premonition. When he had walked into the club he immediately felt a shiver of wrongness, a wicked caress of danger, the edges of the cloak of fate rippling over him. His skin prickled. The little hairs on the backs of his arms stood up. He'd ignored the intuition. He'd walked into the danger. And he'd calmly made promises to that deadly psychopath as if Patrice would so easily believe, after all the rumors, all the stories about Vinnie and Sonny and their friendship, the cement of their brotherly bond, that Vinnie would ever leave Sonny, or ever betray Sonny to his death.

That bar had been so filled with lies a blind man could've seen them. When Patrice had said, "I despise a traitor" and the men came out of the back room holding their weapons on him, Vinnie knew he'd been an idiot. They quickly had him gagged and bound. When he yelled out through the tape on his mouth, part of that rage was at himself, at his own stupidity.

Fearing an early, shallow grave, Vinnie fought to no avail. He was taken to a car, driven blindfolded for some distance, then led outside and into some structure he could sense even though he couldn't see.

Behind his gag he continued to yell, to curse. He kicked at the strong bodies that held him. Terrified, his body shoved and punched, but nothing changed. Then his blindfold was removed and he was thrown to the cold floor of a concrete cell, the barred doors clanging closed behind him, the loud click of a lock snapping in place.

He blinked in the dimness, mouth working wetly around his gag, smelled stale air, salt regret, his own useless sweat.

His knees stung where they'd hit the floor.

His only hope...Frank had known about the meeting. But Frank had not said he was going to survey it. But maybe...maybe if Frank had been watching, if Frank had seen anything, he had been followed.

Maybe the OCB would find him. Before it was too late.

He lay on his side for a moment trying to catch his breath through his nose which was almost impossible. Then miraculously someone spoke, a familiar voice, soft but flat, devoid of any inflection. "Are you really a Fed?"

Vinnie turned over. Now he faced a dark corner. And there sat Sonny in a two grand black silk suit. His Rolex peeked out from under one white shirt cuff. Rings glittered on his fingers. There was no mistake. It was Sonny. And he was sitting in the corner and looking at Vinnie as if nothing bad was happening, nothing was amiss.

If Vinnie had been terrified before, now he was downright horrified. This was a goddamn nightmare. His heart fell at the sight of Sonny locked up with him.

Sonny was not bound in any way. As Vinnie stared at him, Sonny slowly rocked forward onto his knees, then moved toward him. Strangely, Sonny's warm hand reached under Vinnie's head, cupping it, holding it. Then he reached with his free hand and gently removed the duct tape over Vinnie's mouth. Vinnie gasped, air rushing into him. Even after the tape was removed, Sonny still cupped his head, holding him as he caught his breath. Honey brown eyes peered down into Vinnie's face. "Vinnie, are you a cop...?"

Vinnie swallowed but his throat remained dry. "Sonny, I...?"

Sonny rocked back, but his hand still stayed in Vinnie's hair. "So I guess that answers that question." He winced. "A cop for fuck's sake. Damn!"

"Why are you...?"

"Sit up. Come on." Sonny pushed at his head, his other hand going under Vinnie's back to help support him. When Vinnie was sitting Sonny undid the wire at his wrists, throwing it to the side. It clattered against the hard wall.

Vinnie brought his hands forward and rubbed at his wrists. The wire had cut into one. Blood had dried at the edge of his palm. Vinnie saw Sonny watching him. Their eyes met.

"Why are *you* here?" Vinnie asked shakily, though he didn't really want to know the answer to that.

"Patrice."

"He's gonna kill *me*," Vinnie insisted.

Sonny closed his eyes, then opened them a few seconds later. "Kill us both. And that's all...if we're lucky."

"I...I...don't underst..."

“Well,” Sonny interrupted. “I’m the one who hired you.” He let out a sarcastic laugh.

Vinnie’s chest shook. “I’m sorry...”

“Stop right now.”

“But I...”

“Shut up.”

Vinnie felt his eyes blur. Sonny didn’t even seem mad.

Sonny looked away. “So, genius, how do we get outta here? You got any cavalry coming?”

Vinnie blinked, trying to think. Okay. A plan. That’s what they needed. He looked around. It took him two tries but he finally stood, went to the barred door, reached for the lock.

“Already tried that,” said the voice behind him.

”The wire from my wrists. We could use it to pick the lock.”

Sonny brought it to him. But the wire turned out to be too thick to go into the keyhole. Vinnie banged his hand against the bars in frustration. He turned. “What is this place anyway?”

“Some place bad,” Sonny replied darkly.

“Maybe I was being watched. Maybe they’ll come...”

“Who? Your real friends? Your real bosses?”

Vinnie turned away.

Sonny said, very low, “Dammit, Vinnie, was nothing real?”

Vinnie traced the dried blood on his wrist. His mouth felt like it was filled with sand. His lips were unstill even as he clamped them together. He raised his hand and pressed the back of it just above his thumb hard against his chin, trying to still the tremors.

“Vinnie...”

He wished the voice would stop. Sonny couldn’t be here. Not now. Not with him. Sonny couldn’t die. It just wasn’t possible.

“I loved you...” That voice again. The man who’d given him everything.

They were going to die together. On the streets, living so high, dealing like they did, it had always been a possibility. But now?

Vinnie turned to face him. What Sonny had just said... He couldn’t speak. Even locked up, Sonny radiated charisma. His eyes flashed gold, his bronze skin glittered in a fine sweat. He looked trim and determined and forlorn and strong all at the same time. Sonny gazed right into his soul as he seemed always able to do. Except for figuring out the Fed part, Sonny had always been able to read Vinnie’s mind. Vinnie’s hand still pressed hard against his chin. He blinked, looked away, blinked, looked back.

They had been so close. There were more times Vinnie went to bed with the scent of Sonny on him than ever with any scent of a woman. It was simply because they spent so much time together. They shared everything, drank out of each other’s glasses, ate off each other’s plates. They shared limos, they shared bottles of champagne never even going for the glass. They shared opinions, stories, memories. When Sonny got too drunk he never let his hand stray far from Vinnie, whether he was touching him on the shoulder, the back, the wrist, or absently, constantly, petting his hair.

Vinnie liked the attention. All of it. Even the physical affection.

Now Sonny just watched Vinnie. Vinnie tried to speak. His throat remained closed.

Finally Sonny said, “You don’t have to say a thing. You don’t have to.” He turned around three hundred and sixty degrees, surveying their cell. “And now it ends. Nothing is real anyway.”

Vinnie reached for the wall, leaned hard against it. He felt about to collapse. Finally he found a small voice. “Everything was real,” he whispered.

Sonny glanced sharply at him, then down at his own feet. Voice barely audible. “Vincent, I don’t want to bury another brother.”

Vinnie slid down the wall. He rested his head against bent knees. He tried to think. But everything was too real now. Everything was too fresh, too raw. All his barriers were gone. All his shadows and secrets stripped naked. He wasn’t a coward, but the secrets themselves did cower.

After awhile, Sonny sat next to him. Vinnie thought, *There’s another wall. He doesn’t have to share mine.*

But Sonny shared his wall. With no roles left to play, two guys awaited their fate.

After awhile, Sonny said cryptically, “Whatever happens, don’t blame yourself, kid.” At that, he rose up, light on his feet, moving fast as Sonny always did. Startling Vinnie,

Sonny threw himself hard against the barred door, making a lot of noise. He yelled as loud as he could, “Patrice, you fucking bastard! You come here now! You think you can take us? You come here now and just fucking try!”

To Vinnie’s amazement, he kept up the taunts, voice in full form, dancing against the bars, hitting them over and over with his body like a crazy lunatic, challenging. His voice echoed through the dark hall beyond. “Bring it on now, you fucking assholes! Bring it on! Think you can take me? Think again!”

Vinnie squawked out, “Sonny!”

But Sonny didn’t stop. Once he turned on Vinnie. “I’m not gonna sit here patiently waiting for death. It can fucking come and fight me for my soul!”

Vinnie stood, the energy of Sonny filling the room, affecting his blood, his muscles. Sonny was contagious. Sonny was full of power. Vinnie’s adrenalin couldn’t help but start to flow.

Then there were distant voices. Shouts. Over Sonny’s yells, Vinnie could not make out what they said, but the tone was anger. The approach was dark.

Vinnie moved closer to Sonny. It was instinct. It was true need. They were going to have it out now. Sometimes it was easier to face an unseen threat while in contact with another person. Sometimes that was just a fact. His arm brushed Sonny’s. He felt the old automatic heat and power between them grow. He could smell the tart sweat of rage, of terror. And Sonny got even more insane. Cursing in Italian. Encouraging a swifter approach. Vinnie pressed harder to his side, fists clenched, body ready.

As soon as that door opened, there was going to be a fight. If they were lucky, maybe they’d simply be shot. Maybe they’d be beaten. Maybe they’d be made an example of. Well, Vinnie was a Fed. He knew that would no doubt be the case for him. But no matter what, they were going down crazy, fighting, together.

The hall was lit by only dim, yellow, sodium lights. The shadows moved, yelled, echoed. A white hand flashed against the door, a silver key. The lock was taken away.

“Fucking do your worst! Assholes!” As the door opened, Sonny danced through before Vinnie could even grab him back. “Which one of you wants a piece of me? Huh? Then go home to your mama, go to church, and pretend to be such a good boy! Umph!”

Vinnie didn’t see it, but he heard the impact of a fist to Sonny’s face. He reached out, flailing for Sonny’s arm, grabbed it at the same time someone grabbed him and tried to wrench him down. Vinnie struck out blindly. Everything was chaos. It was hard to see, hard to think, hard to assess any of it. It seemed like no time passed...and an eternity. But finally a struggling Vinnie and a struggling Sonny were pinned to the hall floor.

A voice that was none other than Pat the Cat came out of the darkness and said, “Well, Sonny. I always find you in good form.”

“You fucking bastard! You poor excuse of a man. Do you even know how many of your guys are on the take for me?”

Vinnie couldn't believe it. Sonny was egging him on.

“Fuck you, Steelgrave. You're a low-life two-bit thief and always have been. Sid tells me everything. You don't even know how to run your own casino, or keep yourself free of cops.”

“You don't know what I know, Pat! Or have known all along. You're too dumb to see the bigger picture...always the idiot bully.”

Vinnie was stunned. Why was Sonny saying these things? Could it be true that Sonny had known all along he was a cop? But then he realized: No way. Sonny was just trying to rile Patrice.

“I was going make an example of the pig first, make you watch, Sonny, see if you changed your tune any. But now maybe I've changed my mind.”

“Fuck you, prick!”

Pat turned to his men, two still standing at his side, the rest still holding Vinnie and Sonny to the floor. “Him first. Make it unpleasant. I want him to know what it's like to be fucked over by a friend. And don't kill him. Yet. Make the cop watch.”

And that was when Vinnie knew. Sonny was deliberately grabbing the attention, taking their ire, distracting them away from Vinnie. Sonny was...was...saving him?

Vinnie yelled through clenched teeth. He was on his side. Hands held him from all angles as he twisted and turned trying to free himself. He could see Sonny on his stomach struggling again, cursing in Italian, crying out as they began to beat him, shoulders, back, kidneys, thigh. He spit in the direction of Pat's voice. “You prick! You fucked up piece of garbage!”

“Now Sonny, didn't your mother teach you any manners?”

“You're nothing!” Sonny countered, spitting blood. “Nothing and you know it or we wouldn't be here in your makeshift little dungeon! You have to be compensating for something, Pat. Did that cat get both your balls back when we were fourteen, cause I heard it was only one.”

Amazed that Sonny wouldn't stop, even as fists pummeled him, Vinnie watched a shiny black shoe move forward from the shadows and impact hard with Sonny's already

bruised and bleeding face. Vinnie rocked back in shocked empathy as hands gripped him harder, but Sonny only laughed, shrill and dangerous.

“Oh, Pat,” he huffed, laughing still. “So it *was* castration that helped you keep your boyish features.”

Vinnie watched Patrice lean down then, his face coming into the sick, ochre light. “I’m not gonna be the girl here tonight, Sonny!” He slapped him.

“You fuck!” Sonny didn’t duck. He spat again. Pat stepped away, made some motion, and Vinnie thought there had to be at least twenty guys, half holding him down as he struggled, and half of which began tearing at Sonny’s clothes as Sonny howled, as Sonny continued to taunt Pat.

“You want this?” Sonny yelled. “Do it yourself! Coward! You want a piece of me? You always did, but you never wanted to get those girl hands dirty!”

“If you don’t make him scream, I’ll kill you all,” Pat said calmly to his men.

“I’m right, you are a coward!” Sonny yelled.

Vinnie started to fight again, heard himself yell out over and over. Why was Sonny doing this? He wasn’t sure his voice formed any words, but there was this primeval, gut rage that took him over as he watched Sonny stripped from the waist down, as he saw hands pull at his legs, spreading him, exposing him.

The noise level, the yelling, the cursing. It was deafening, overwhelming. Worse ever than anything he’d ever heard in prison. It went on and on as Vinnie fought and rocked and punched and kicked trying to get to Sonny. But he couldn’t budge free, and the first man between Sonny’s legs slammed so hard into him that Sonny gagged, retched. He couldn’t bring himself to look away as Sonny stiffened, as Sonny grunted in pain, tried to scramble forward amid laughter and strange, encouraging shouts. Vinnie shouted and cursed, taking up where Sonny’s voice, too quiet now, had left off. Fists continued to beat Sonny into silence. And suddenly he went limp, and the evil laughter radiated faster, louder. Could that be cheering?

And Pat. Through it all, there was Patrice’s inane, psychopathic voice. “The proud Sonny Steelgrave...reduced to this.” Victory in his perverted tone. Amused disgust.

How long it lasted...how many men assaulted him? Vinnie didn’t know anymore. Three? Five? Time had stopped. There was no way to discern the difference between seconds and eternity. It seemed he could feel everything that was being done to Sonny, like an echoing response inside himself. It had happened before. When Sonny got hurt, sometimes Vinnie imagined he felt the pain, too, in the same spot, a tingling, invisible echo. It was an uncanny link Vinnie had never known, even with his own brother.

Somewhere in the midst of it all, another loud sound could be heard now. Something even more threatening. Something the body automatically jerked to.

Gunshots.

The men backed off. There were yells from far away. Running, echoing footsteps. Patrice was suddenly gone. And Vinnie finally found himself free, sitting up, looking around confused.

Sonny lay before him on his stomach wearing only his white shirt. He was not moving.

More gunshots. Running. The men were just gone.

All sound seemed to fade to a pinpoint, muffled, dream-like. And yes, it was like a dream; Sonny was right...everything so surreal. Quickly, he reached out for the body in front of him, grabbing him hard, pulling him onto his kneeling lap. His hands were shaking as he rolled Sonny into his embrace. The man moved, curling into him, still alive.

“Oh god Sonny...”

Sonny was trembling, in shock. Vinnie let him go for a moment and took off his jacket. He draped it around him, pulling him tighter to his chest, then glanced around, barely hearing the gunshots now, barely aware they were getting closer.

Vinnie was breathing hard. He bent his head into Sonny’s warm shoulder. “I got you...”

Sonny replied through bloodied lips, one eye drooping closed, “All I had was you, Vinnie...”

“I’m here. I’m here, Sonny.” But he knew Sonny didn’t hear him. His good eye had rolled up. He’d passed out again, his breathing erratic, blood soaking Vinnie’s shirt, soaking through the jacket Vinnie pressed against him.

Footsteps approached. He couldn’t move. He could only sit there like some dumb animal, freaked out, waiting for a hopefully swift end.

“Vince?”

A familiar voice in the dark. Scuff of shoes. As Vinnie watched, Frank McPike stooped down before him. “Vince, thank God...”

Vinnie looked up into those big thick glasses trying to see the eyes of his boss, trying to believe any of it was real anymore. “Frank?”

“Yeah, it’s okay now, sport,” came the soothing reply.

“Frank. It’s Sonny.” His voice shook. He looked down as he stuttered. “He...he’s hurt bad. Real bad, Frank.”

“Okay. We got the paramedics here.” Then Frank put his hand on Vinnie’s shoulder, turned to the side and spoke swiftly into a walkie-talkie.

Frank had to convince Vinnie to let them take Sonny from his arms. “You’re in shock, kid. It’s okay now.”

Vinnie tried to stand. “I’m going with him!” But as he spoke he felt himself start to fall.

“You can barely walk,” Frank said.

“I’m going with him.”

Frank helped him follow the paramedics. The light hurt his eyes when they got outside. He started to falter.

Frank said, “You need medical attention of your own.”

“You have to let me go with him,” Vinnie insisted.

“It might blow your cover.”

“How? We’re the victims. You aren’t after *us*. It’s Patrice you want now, right? Right?”

“But he knows now,” Frank pointed out, motioning toward Sonny on the stretcher.

Vinnie shook his head. “He’s not gonna say anything. He has his own rep to protect.”

Frank nodded slowly, heavily sighing. “I’ll go with you.”

Vinnie didn’t care if it was a little crowded in the ambulance with him, Frank, Sonny and the paramedics. It didn’t matter. He wasn’t leaving Sonny’s side. He’d already betrayed him, caused the whole fucking shit to hit the fan. And Sonny had still moved only to protect him. He wasn’t ever going to let him down again. Never.

In the hospital emergency room, as Sonny was being stitched and splinted and taped and drugged, he came to consciousness twice. And twice he said to Vinnie, “You can’t be here.” And twice Vinnie replied, “I’m not leaving you.”

Vinnie threatened to flash his OCB status publicly when Frank tried to bodily remove him from Sonny’s room. So he left him. And Vinnie sat by the side of the bed. Sometimes he just watched Sonny sleep, staring at the mangled face, the puffy eye

turning all shades of blue and purple and green, the split lip that had finally stopped seeping blood. Sometimes he clasped his hand.

When Sonny woke again, he looked at Vinnie and said, groggily, “You look like shit.”

Vinnie just nodded.

Then Sonny said, “What are you, like some virus I can’t get rid of?”

“Something like that,” Vinnie replied, grabbing Sonny’s limp hand. Sonny did not grip back, but he did not push him away, either. After awhile he fell back to sleep and Vinnie dozed through the long night refusing to leave his chair.

What Vinnie learned the following day was this: Pat the Cat and most of his men in that facility had been killed. Two OCB agents also met their deaths in the ensuing shootout.

That afternoon, Frank finally convinced Vinnie to let a doctor look him over. Then he presented Vinnie with a change of clothes, sweats, a t-shirt. Vinnie’s suit was stiff, caked with blood. Vinnie showered in Sonny’s room. He refused to go any further away.

When Sonny woke again, he could open both his eyes. He said in a remarkably normal voice, “I’m hungry.”

Vinnie went to flag down some food.

At least a dozen of Sonny’s “soldiers” arrived, most hanging out in the hall. Sonny refused them admittance to his room. Then he said to Vinnie, “What the hell are you still doing here?”

“M not leaving,” Vinnie mumbled grouchyly. He’d had little sleep.

Sonny was sitting up now, idly poking his food. The green hospital gown drooped at his slim chest, the bare skin there dark and bruised. It did not cover his bandaged wrist, or the bruises and abrasions on his elbows and slim-muscled forearms. Vinnie tried not to stare.

“I mean it’s dangerous,” Sonny continued. “For you.” His glance flashed sharp into Vinnie’s face.

Vinnie leaned forward. “My cover’s intact.”

Now Sonny shrewdly assessed him. “So?”

“So there’s no danger.”

Sonny looked back down at his food. He made a face. “Maybe there’s danger from me...”

“Yeah?” Vinnie sat back, crossing his arms, knowing it wasn’t true. Sonny had gambled his own life to save him. He would never hurt him, and Vinnie knew it.

Sonny may have been a mess, but his eyes flickered. “What if I yelled your secret to the world? What would you do then?”

Vinnie shrugged, looked away. “I don’t care. Do whatever you want.”

Sonny sighed heavily. “Tell you what. You get me outta here, I don’t tell. Cause I don’t wanna spend one more fucking night here. Deal?”

Vinnie stared at him. Sonny’s eyes were sharp, flat. He was dead serious.

“Okay, Sonny.”

Vinnie got up then and sauntered out the door.

*

SONNY

This place was lush. Thick. Damp. I wanted to lose myself in it. But you didn’t really get lost in places like this. And Vinnie was always too damn close.

This was a vacation. A get-away. We weren’t running. Not really. Were we?

A private resort. A secluded cabin. Just what the doctor ordered.

Even though I was still healing, I felt pretty good the first week we were here. The antibiotics had done the trick. I’ve always been a fast healer. I was able to walk just about everywhere around the town. If I got too drunk, well, we took a cab. Or Vinnie drove the rental.

I felt best at night, actually. I loved to walk in the darkness, or sit and stare at the black sea because it felt like a new world was forming in those moments, like I was in a place distant from any past, or any memory.

There weren’t really any problems. Well, there was the Vinnie-problem. Of course. The thing I wanted most in all the world. But my hands refused to just reach out and take it. Or if they did, pressing to that engaging warmth, my whole body would start to shake.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

I knew I was okay. What Pat's men did? Who cared? They were fucking roaches, all of them. They didn't matter. What mattered was they never got Vinnie. And Pat was dead now. Vinnie told me that much.

I didn't go over and over it in my mind. Not really. But what Vinnie saw, what Vinnie had to see now every time he looked at me...how could this not come between us? How could we not now be two completely different people?

He held me when I passed out in that dungeon darkness. He was my witness. But even though I never wanted Patrice's men to touch him, I so did *not* want this for him, either. Being the witness. Watching their evil acts. I didn't want that for him. Not ever for him. And I couldn't help but wonder, how did he see me now? It colored my every thought about "us," or going back to Atlantic City. My pulse would race. I felt strange, funny. Worried that Vinnie's patience would end, that he would no longer see me as the person I used to be.

I was afraid then Vinnie would just finally leave.

*

VINNIE

Vinnie watched as a distant Sonny walked slowly down the rocky beach. Sonny looked fit and solid, healthy and normal. But he looked so very alone. Indifferent. Uninterested.

After the Incident, Sonny never complained. He didn't whine or moan or even really have nightmares. He spoke lightly. He ate heartily. He instigated trips to town. But he was far from normal. Something was gone from him. Some deeper energy. That infectious spark that flared Vinnie's own adrenalin was there, but so subdued now.

Several days after the resort medic had removed Sonny's stitches, and Sonny's face had healed to normal, they'd gone to the resort gym. The gym had a ring and they both donned gloves and climbed in. For about five minutes they just stared at each other, neither one making the first move, neither one raising their hands. Finally, they both just sighed and climbed out of the ring. Onlookers were baffled.

Now, Vinnie watched Sonny kick at some rocks. The wind off the dusky sea was cold. It fluttered Sonny's jacket, but Sonny seemed to take no notice. He moved randomly, like someone lost.

And Vinnie's heart clenched. He bit his lower lip, tried not to think. But the Incident came back to him. Again. Again. Sonny so strong, never giving up, lying bloody and helpless on the floor. Sonny in his arms saying, "All I had was you..."

God damn it all...

He remembered taking Sonny out of the hospital three days after the Incident. Frank was livid. But if he did anything short of arresting Vinnie, Vinnie's cover would be blown. And so he could only stand by as Vinnie pushed Sonny's wheelchair out of the hospital and up to the waiting limo.

As if nothing had changed, Sonny and Vinnie, dressed in expensive suits which one of Sonny's guys had brought to them, and flashing twin gold Rolexes, got into the limo and drove away.

After those three awful days in the hospital, Sonny still had bandages. One on his wrist. One on his ribs. And he had tape by his eyebrow, and stitches on his side. Vinnie thought maybe somebody's ring had cut him there on the side. The rest of him, torn, abraded, damaged but intact, was left to heal naturally.

When they got home, Vinnie thought Sonny should go to his penthouse, but instead Sonny went straight to his office. He sat at his desk popping antibiotics and pain pills but otherwise acting normal. Vinnie sat on the couch. All like usual. People came in, were predictably startled at the mess of Sonny's face and hands, then welcomed him home. He smiled and nodded at them all, waving them away with his bandaged hand. All the people Sonny had worked with, including Mahoney, had been told the same general story. There'd been a bad confrontation with Patrice. Sonny and Vinnie alone had survived. Thanks to McPike, none of it made the papers except a short article about the death of Patrice, gunned down by cops during a raid.

Sonny shuffled through his mail. Hummed a little minor tune. After a few hours of this, he finally ordered Vinnie to his suite for some sleep, and went alone to his penthouse.

Vinnie had wanted to follow. He had tried to get Sonny to come into his own suite and share a nightcap. But Sonny would have none of that.

"No thanks. I'm just gonna go to bed."

It was the first night Vinnie was not at Sonny's side. After everything they'd been through, it felt awful and wrong but there was nothing he could do. He barely slept.

The next day, in Sonny's office, Sonny turned to him. Vinnie looked up over the edge of the newspaper. Sonny's face was a little better today, a little less pale and colorful. "You can't stay here anymore," Sonny said quietly.

Vinnie swallowed hard.

Softer, "What am I gonna do with you now? Knowing what you are? Who you are?"

Vinnie took a breath.

“Didn’t you think about that, Vinnie? Huh?”

“Yeah,” Vinnie said dumbly. But really his mind was racing. He was on Sonny’s side. He wanted him protected, dammit. After everything Sonny had done for him.

He’d done everything he could think to do now but “turn.”

“And what do your superiors say about all this? You still hanging out here... Well?”

“I’m gonna quit OCB, Sonny.”

Sonny’s jaw dropped. “You...what?”

“I could work for you for real. Bodyguard or something.”

Sonny sat back, staring at him in shock. Then he let out a kind of damaged laugh.

Vinnie put down the paper, stood. He faced Sonny at his glass desk, the smoky windows behind him showing gray, indistinct outlines of the other buildings that made up downtown Atlantic City. Sonny was framed in gray. Diminished. Unreal.

Something hot and cloying gathered in his chest. A strange burn. A kind of rage, of loss.

“It’s not funny. After everything you’ve done for me.” Then he said, very quietly, “I loved you, too.” He didn’t want to know the response. So he turned and walked out of the office. He went up to his suite.

For awhile he stood in the living room just looking around. He wasn’t sure if he should pack or make himself a drink. Maybe both. His eyes felt funny. For awhile he couldn’t move.

He hadn’t spoken to Frank in 24 hours. Frank was going to be hopping mad.

He decided to make himself a drink. Vodka and orange juice. One of Sonny’s favorites.

He took it to the couch and sat, just staring out the window at the gray city. The burn in his chest had diminished somewhat. He didn’t have as good a view as Sonny did from his penthouse, but it was nice. Beyond the buildings he could see the ocean, dark and forceful and cold. It was beautiful.

He fell asleep on the couch.

Later, it was Sonny who woke him with a touch on his arm. He sat up quickly, rubbing his eyes.

“I was looking for you,” Sonny said quietly, standing beside the couch.

“I was here,” Vinnie said, still half asleep.

“Did you really mean you were going to quit?”

Vinnie nodded. “I say what I mean.”

“Why come work for me?”

Vinnie gave him a pained look. “Don’t be stupid.”

“We can’t...can’t be together, Vinnie,” Sonny hedged awkwardly.

Vinnie rubbed at his eyes again. So there it was, the truth...there was a “we.” And a “together.”

“Maybe somewhere down the road...bodyguard...I don’t know...”

Vinnie looked up at him, not breathing. Their eyes locked. They both knew Sonny’s words held no conviction. It wasn’t a “bodyguard” Sonny wanted, or Vinnie wanted to be.

Sonny said hastily, “I’m going away anyway... for awhile.”

“What? Where?”

“Just taking a vacation. You know.”

Vinnie said, “Take me with you.”

Sonny turned away. “I’m going alone.”

“Take me with you.” Vinnie stood.

Sonny did not turn back, but instead headed for the elevator.

Vinnie followed rapidly, coming up behind him so close he could feel Sonny’s heat. “Take me with you!” he insisted.

Sonny stopped, started to lean back. They almost touched. Almost.

Then Sonny said, “Fuck.” He breathed in once, then out. “We leave in an hour.”

Vinnie was ready in fifteen minutes.

Vinnie remembered not wanting to say good bye to anyone, not even Frank. Only when they got to the resort in northern New England did Vinnie call Frank.

“What are you doing, Vince? Where are you?”

“We went on a...a sort of vacation.”

“Where?”

“He doesn’t want anyone to know. So...”

“Vince, you can’t do this...”

“Watch me, Frank.”

“You have a job.”

“I can resign my job.”

Softer, distant. “No, don’t do that.”

“Well, I’m not in any position to leave, or go on another case. I wouldn’t be able to...concentrate.”

“You’re a professional, Vince.”

“I’d be wondering all the time, worrying about him. I can’t do anything else right now, Frank. So whatever you see fit. If you want my resignation, I’ll mail it in.”

“Why in hell is he keeping your secret? Why is he even letting you near him?”

“Why wouldn’t he? If it got out that I was a Fed, it’d ruin him, too. Frank, I started this. I gotta see it through.”

“But why...”

“Frank,” he interrupted. He did not want to answer that second question: *Why is he even letting you near him?* What could he say? That they were that close? Frank would never understand. “It just is the way it is.”

“You can’t be responsible for all the fall-out of your job, Vince.”

“Yeah, well. Let me know what you want me to do. Either put me on leave or I’ll send in the papers.”

“Vince...”

“I gotta go, Frank.”

It was a hard phone call. He felt out of sorts, shaky. For distraction, he picked up his duffel and started unpacking. Sonny walked into the room. He glanced at him and Vinnie took a quick breath, saying. “Which bed do you want?”

“Who was that on the phone?”

Vinnie turned away and started putting clothes into an open drawer. “I’ll take this one.”

“Did you quit your job?”

Vinnie shook his head. “Not yet.”

Sonny came over to him and sat down on the bed Vinnie had just said was his. He leaned back on his elbows, watching as Vinnie took more clothes out of his duffel and put them away. “Your job saved us, you know.”

It was the first time Sonny had said anything about the Incident. It had been four days and Sonny still looked pretty banged up, one eye still half-swollen, his wrist useless for now. But he also looked...wonderful to Vinnie. Sharp. Clear-eyed. Alert. He watched Vinnie a lot, even though Vinnie pretended not to notice. And he had let Vinnie come on the trip with him. That was...well...everything.

Vinnie didn’t know what to say. Maybe Frank saved them both, but it was the job that had gotten them into this mess. And it was Sonny who had saved him. He said, motioning toward the bed Sonny sat on, “Did you want that bed?”

Sonny’s head tilted. “It doesn’t matter to me.” He got up suddenly, surveying the room, then turned. “C’mon. Let’s go out to dinner.”

Vinnie put away his stack of shirts and followed him out the door.

Now the memory faded as Vinnie watched Sonny move along the edge of the dark Atlantic. His chest ached. He put on his coat and headed for the door.

*

SONNY

The ocean is like a god. All-powerful. It gives and takes on random whims. If I were an ocean, maybe I would feel complete.

I didn't care if it was cold. I'd loved the autumn wind since I was a kid. Coming all salty and briny off the sea, that weird roar, it was a perfect reflection of the human soul, always needing, hunting, always wanting, always moving forward and back and never seeming to know what it really wants.

That's us humans, all right. Indecisive. Unsure. Thinking we're mighty but really we're only brief images, there then gone, in the vastness of the quotidian universe.

I did not know if I'd deserved anything I'd gotten in life. How could anyone? So I just took. Whatever I wanted. Whenever I could. That was my philosophy.

Then Vinnie came into my life. Made me want to do better. Made me want to give up past habits and pleasures just to make sure he was safe.

I wanted to deserve him. Even now. It was stupid of me, I knew. Because Vinnie just was... Like air. Everyone deserved air, didn't they?

But when he touched me last night, when he kissed me, I hurt so bad inside. It was supposed to be the good kind of hurting, the startled wonder of love, the awe that burns but brings such pleasure with it.

But I could feel only the hurt.

It was because of that thing between us. That memory he must have every time he looked at me. It ruined the spark. It had to.

I loved Vinnie more than any other person I'd ever known. I loved him that much. Too much. That was a problem. Something inside me was just sure I'd fuck it up.

Because that's what I always do. Fuck things up.

I don't go into relationships that last. I go into them to get what I need...and then I turn my back.

If I'd just waited a little while longer when me and Vinnie were locked up. If I hadn't been so headstrong, so mad, so arrogantly needing to force the fight, things might've ended differently. Vinnie's people would have come before Pat's guys came for us. Vinnie's people would've blown them all away, and me and Vinnie would've walked out into the sunlight unchanged, unharmed, the world's shadows falling away from us because we were just that lucky, that strong, that fortunate when we were together.

Me and Vinnie. The perfect unit. Nothing could stand against us.

Christ! Was I *that* blind?

And all the time I thought how invincible we were, my best friend, secretly one of my most dangerous enemies, was standing right at my side!

I never thought of Vinnie as an enemy, though. Never. Not for one second. Not even in that damned dungeon of Pat's before he got there, when I was alone and trying not to feel the cold and thinking, knowing that this was the end, that Vinnie was a Judas and I would die for it.

It makes little sense, but no, not even then was I mad at Vinnie.

He might've been dangerous to me, but I wanted him protected. And being who he was, well, that saved both our lives. He had the angles covered. He wasn't sure his boss was watching...but he was pretty sure. And his boss, that Frank guy, he was on the ball that day. Guess I gotta hand it to the OCB. How could I know getting taken down might officially save my life?

I knew now Vinnie was watching me walk on the beach. I didn't see him in the window, but I felt his eyes. His strength. He was right there, just up those sea cliff steps, just inside that little house on the edge of the little woods, standing there, waiting.

He was waiting for me. Patient and so damned stubborn.

Last night, yeah, I wanted him to kiss me. But I wanted it to be better. I wanted myself to be better.

After our first night here, after Vinnie started sleeping in my bed, nothing had changed as far as our relationship, as far as that went. And yes, we had a relationship. We'd been in one for awhile, I figured. It just wasn't obvious. It didn't involve overt romance or sex, but we did everything else together. Everything. The first week here we had found a ton of things to fill our days, exploring the town, sampling all the restaurants, getting drunk at all the bars. We went to every movie that was showing at the little theatre. We shopped and bought warm, casual clothes. We went to a little street fair where Vinnie bought a wide, sterling silver band and slipped it onto his middle finger.

"Why don't you let me buy you a gold one?" I asked, not understanding, spoiled as I am, why someone would settle for anything less.

"I always wanted a plain silver band. For just this finger," Vinnie replied, smiling.

I shrugged. It was okay that Vinnie liked silver and I liked gold. Fitting maybe. But it was something about him I didn't know before. I was still finding out things about him, little things. It was nice.

I remember we'd been there four days at that point. That afternoon, after we came home from the fair, I went for my usual walk. I left Vinnie sitting on the couch with wine, TV and a roaring fire. I could tell he was a little hurt by me leaving. We were watching a

movie together, after all, and I was just suddenly vacating the room. But I needed the air. He knew I had habits now of just wanting to be left alone. And I had to have time to myself. I'd told him that. What I didn't tell him was that sometimes when he was around I couldn't always think straight. Sometimes, knowing he was watching me a little too closely, I'd start to remember too much about that day, and I didn't want to remember. So much was a blur and I'd rather leave it at that. Except for the fact that if I'd waited McPike and his men would've come in and saved us—although I didn't know that at the time—I didn't have any regrets about what I did, egging those guys on, baiting Patrice, but it so bugged me that he'd witnessed everything that had happened to me, that he was misunderstanding it all. Sometimes it made me downright on edge. I'd wonder again and again what those memories were doing to him, what he was seeing, really, when he looked at me.

When I couldn't stand it I got out. I went for walks. Long walks.

That day I came back within about half an hour. That was one of my shorter walks because I just couldn't get his face outta my head. I wanted to come back to him for a change. I wanted to sit back down on that soft couch and finish the movie and the wine.

But when I got back, Vinnie was gone. The fire was cinders. The TV was dead.

I went to the back door and stared out. The woods greeted me. Dark and damp, but not too deep. You couldn't get lost in them. I knew. I'd tried.

I figured maybe he went for a walk, too. So I took a few steps down the path, leisurely, not really too concerned, and then I heard a sound. My eyes followed the sound easily. The woods were dripping but pretty bare at this time of year, and there wasn't much mist yet, so I could clearly see. Vinnie was off about thirty yards leaning against a tree. Leaning hard. Clutching at the rough trunk. His head bowed.

I heard the sound again and turned away.

Quietly, I went back into the house, tidied up our glasses, put away the wine. A few minutes later Vinnie walked through the back door. He looked...just fine. Sweet as always. Those blue eyes clear, smiling at me.

There was no sign at all he'd been crying. That was no doubt the trained liar in him.

But I smiled at him, then grabbed him by the sleeve of his sweater. "C'mon. We're going out."

"What?" He looked genuinely perplexed.

"Steak dinner tonight. The works. I'm in the mood."

"O...okay."

We grabbed our jackets and left. I spent the rest of the evening distracting him.

That day seeing him out by the tree disturbed me more than I could ever say. I didn't want to see it again; I wanted to fix things. Dinner, distractions, spending, it was the only way I knew. So that was what I did.

What we did.

I think we came to know every inch of that town, every foot of every bar and restaurant, every shop, every dust mote in every shop window.

Even though nothing changed, it was good.

After that first week, we settled in more. I didn't go out as much. I didn't want to.

I cooked more. Vinnie cooked more. He shared his mother's spaghetti recipe and I made my famous lasagna. Well, it's not famous, but as far as I know it's the best. I hadn't cooked anything myself like that in years. It was funny, I guess. Us living like that, like the rest of the world didn't exist. Like we were in for some long haul. We were comfortable with each other. That was fine. We didn't need to talk if we didn't want to, but sometimes we would drink and talk like old times when we used to compare memories of growing up, him in Brooklyn, me in the Bronx.

Those cold nights in bed together, before the kiss, very little happened. One of those nights, maybe the third night we were there, I don't know what I was thinking. I just reached out right after he got into bed and ran my hand up his chest, then down his shoulder and arm. He wasn't wearing a shirt. The tan skin was like silk. He was so beautiful. My insides shuddered. I couldn't catch my breath. He was watching me, then, and I suddenly felt freaked out, just wondering what he saw. Slowly I turned away.

"Don't," he said softly. He didn't exactly grab me, but he touched me lightly on the arm, then scooted his other arm under me and pulled me to him. He reached up and turned off the light.

"Don't turn away," he whispered in my ear.

When he didn't try anything else, I let my cheek rest against his broad chest. There was a voice whispering inside me rapidly, like my heartbeat, "It's okay," it said, over and over. "It really is okay."

I fell asleep listening to it.

After that it was easier to touch him, because he didn't ask for anything. Never. He demanded nothing from me. Until last night. Until that kiss. And after that he still let me go. He just let me be.

So, as I walked along that rocky beach, it was easy for me to feel his eyes on me. I knew he was thinking about it, just like me. That kiss.

The wind flew through my jacket like it was a sail. It cut through me, freezing and wet, making my heart feel like it was shrinking. The iciness was in my eyes, on my cheeks. My ears flamed. I should have worn a cap.

Still, it wasn't enough to make me turn back. I kicked at more rocks, walked down the beach a few more yards. When I turned around, Vinnie was standing there at the shore not ten yards from me. Vinnie *never* came after me.

Slowly, I approached.

"You're gonna freeze to death," he said, over the wind. His black hair glistened as the air rifled it shamelessly.

"Nah. I'm too stubborn to freeze," I replied.

"Come on back."

He'd been watching me this whole time. I liked that he was concerned, that he worried. But it unnerved me, too. What was he thinking? How could he see anything other than me on the floor with ten guys on top of me when he looked at me so hard, so long? What in hell was he thinking?

I shook my head.

"Yeah, stubborn is right," he said.

At those words, I felt a weird, hot fire under my ribs. Annoyed, I said, "Yeah, well you don't have to hang out. You can leave any time."

Vinnie frowned. "I could."

"So, why not, then? I'm a bore. I'm poor company anyway."

"No you're not. Sonny, don't..."

I turned away, staring out at the vastness of the sea, letting the freezing wind numb my face.

Vinnie took a step toward me. "Sonny, please..."

The waves rolled and swelled. I thought about being one with them, just walking into them and never looking back. "Please what?" My voice was hard, harsh.

“Please talk to me.”

That was all he said. And it was too much to ask. Because how could I when he didn't talk to me? What would I say?

I lifted my arms a bit, feeling the wind whip up under my sweater, cold, unfeeling, making me into stone. “What do you want me to say? Huh?” Wind in my eyes. Wind in my mouth. Everything about me. Searching, endless, breathless wind.

“Anything,” was his reply.

I didn't blink. The sea filled my eyes. “How do I say to you, Vinnie, that you can't really know me anymore?” I felt hollow, smug. I knew he would misunderstand those words. I knew I shouldn't have said them without some context. But I just turned and walked away.

He didn't follow me. When I looked back minutes later, he was gone. I walked and walked until I couldn't feel my hands, until I couldn't feel my feet.

Then I, too, turned and went home.

I walked numbly into the living room. The fire was warm, the little house fresh and clean. But I was so cold. I went over to the fire. Vinnie came into the room from the kitchen. As usual, he just watched me.

“Stop it,” I said.

“Huh?”

“Stop watching me.”

But he didn't go away. Instead, he came forward. “Sonny, what did you mean?”

I frowned. “What?”

“You said I can't know you. That's crazy. What the fuck?”

As I was reaching my hands toward the fire to warm them, he grabbed my arm, turning me. I tried to yank away from him, but he had a tight hold.

“Let go.”

“No. Tell me. What do you mean?” he insisted.

“Fuck you, then.” I pushed him.

He pushed back. “Quit it now, Sonny! Talk to me!”

My body was starting to feel again. The cold ran through my veins. My teeth started to chatter.

He pulled me to him, peeling off my wet jacket, holding me. I just let myself go limp against that warmth, shivering beyond my control.

His arms rubbed up and down mine, over my back. He pressed himself to me, warming me.

Finally, my teeth stopped knocking together. My throat opened back up. I lifted my head. The blue eyes watched, but they were so kind, so soft. I took a breath, almost didn't find my voice. “I only wanted you.”

He looked aside for a moment, as if thinking.

“No one but you,” I repeated.

“But that's the way things are...” Confused. Lost.

“What they did to me... It should only have been you who ever touched me like that... Now, how you see me...how can you ever know *me*?”

He blinked, frowned. “What? That doesn't make any sense!”

I pulled back roughly. My voice shook. “I *wanted* it to be you!” Maybe I said it too loudly. I don't know. Everything was just so wrong.

“But...”

I turned away, walking toward the bedroom.

I didn't feel like myself anymore. It was such a stupid thing for me to say. I shouldered out of my damp jacket, opened my sweater drawer.

Vinnie leaned against the doorway. I pretended not to see him. I took off my damp sweater and put on a dry one, then turned to face him. “Hungry?”

He moved forward quickly, grabbing me. “Shut up.”

“Hey!”

He jerked me hard. “What are you doing? What the fuck are you thinking?”

I blinked up into his eyes. “I’m thinking about ribs, and baked beans, and seasoned fries with everything.”

He jerked me again. Then he leaned forward and kissed me hard, open-mouthed. I made a protesting moan but he didn’t let up. He pushed against me, seemed to inhale my lips. He wouldn’t let me breathe. He wouldn’t let me go. He tasted of fire and wine. Of ocean mist and shadow.

I admit. I barely struggled. I wanted to feel the claws on my back, the sweep of wings, trade my soul for another hunter. I wanted to feel him.

And maybe there was something...something beginning to burn. But before I could be sure, he pulled back. His lips were slightly swollen, his eyes misty. He had such a hurt, guilty look. “Fine,” he said gruffly. “Ribs. I’ll drive.” He turned to the bureau and grabbed his keys to the rental car.

It took a few seconds for me to come back to my senses. But slowly I followed him outside.

We didn’t talk on the drive to the restaurant.

When we got our table I ordered a double whiskey, neat.

He motioned to the waitress to make it two.

We hid behind our menus for a minute. She came back with the drinks and we ordered.

After downing his whole drink, Vinnie said while staring at his empty glass, “You know, after everything, you can’t push me away.”

I replied, maybe a little too clipped, “Not trying to.”

“Okay.” He paused for a moment, then shrugged.

“What?” Maybe my tone was slightly irritable.

He answered earnestly. “You can’t think like that, Sonny...like what we have has changed at all, or how I see you is anything but...but good...”

“I don’t, dammit! Was just sayin’ what I *wanted*.”

He narrowed his eyes, leaned almost all the way forward across the table, and practically sneered as he said, very slowly, enunciating each word as if I were a child, “Then maybe it would help a little if, when I kiss you, you kiss me back.”

I sneered back. “Ya think?”

“Yeah. I think.”

We just stared at each other for a moment. He had the most put out look, his brows drawn down, his mouth an almost pout. And then something weird happened. A strange feeling started to crawl up inside my chest. It bubbled and churned its way upward from my lungs to my throat. And I started to fucking laugh.

Vinnie looked utterly shocked.

Which only made me laugh more until I was wiping at my eyes. I hadn't laughed in so long. In fact, I didn't remember the last time I did it.

Vinnie was shaking his head. And he looked so dark and beautiful in that low lighting. I thought, okay, so now he must be thinking me insane—he'd already called me 'crazy' twice—but it was funny because I really didn't give a shit.

“You don't get anymore of this,” he said suddenly, grabbing my drink out from under my hand.

“Hey!”

But before I could grab it back, he downed it in one gulp.

I signaled the waitress for two more doubles.

He looked at me through narrowed eyes, then said, “I just wish you'd talk to me more.”

“Hell, buddy, that works both ways.”

Both his eyebrows rose at that.

“Well,” I added, “you never tell me anything you're thinking. What am I supposed to think?”

“I...I...”

I mimicked his tone back to him. “I...I...” Then I paused for affect. He started to look hurt. “See? You can't even talk to me.”

He was silent, eyes locked with mine.

“What?” I drew out the word in my most irritated tone.

The waitress brought the second batch of drinks. He grabbed his. Drank most of it, then said, “Okay, you're right. What do you want to know about what I'm thinking?”

I just stared at my whiskey. “For starters...everything.”

A wisp of a smile lifted the edges of his lips. I could still feel them on mine, hot, demanding. I could still taste him like a fine, dry wine that cost more than most people made in a month. It made me hungry.

Vinnie said, “Everything, huh?”

I nodded. “Why not?”

“Okay, mister. Quid pro quo.” Vinnie was often a smart-ass.

“Quid pro what?” I knew what it meant, but I liked to tease him.

“It means like you said. This works both ways.”

I just threw him a smug smile.

“So go ahead, ask me a question or something. I mean, where do we start?” he asked.

Yeah, that was the question all right. Where do we start? We both knew the subject we were dodging.

“Okay, do you want to go back to Atlantic City?” I asked.

“Do you?”

“You can’t answer a question with a question.”

Vinnie sighed. “No, not really.”

“Thoughts, Vinnie, you have to elaborate. How come?”

“I...I...”

I waited.

Finally he relented. “Okay, Sonny. It’s like this. I don’t want to face my job, or quitting it just yet. And I don’t think you should go back yet, either.”

“Why?”

Vinnie looked down, took a sip of his drink.

“Why?”

He stayed silent.

“I wanna know what you see when you look at me.” There. It was out. That’s what I wanted most.

Vinnie’s eyes flicked up. “Huh? What?” He leaned back in the booth, his body almost languid, and I realized he was getting quite quickly drunk. He’d already drunk my first drink, his first and most of his second. He looked down to my chest, then back to my face. His eyes sparkled. “Okay.” He licked his lips.

“You’re...the...light...of...my...li...”

Fuck! I kicked him hard under the table.

Vinnie burst into laughter. “The...wind...beneath...my...”

I kicked him again. Then I reached out and grabbed his drink. “You don’t get to have anymore of this!”

But it was too late. And it took us both an hour after dinner, and several cups of coffee, to sober up enough to drive back home.

*

VINNIE

Vinnie parked the car as close to the house as he could. The wind was blowing so hard it nearly pushed the car door closed on his body. And the glacier freeze of it was heart-stopping. Through gritted teeth he yelled, “Christ!”

Sonny was just ahead of him and a gust of wind pushed so strong against him it nearly tore the jacket from his body. He turned, grinning at Vinnie. “What the fuck?”

“Ships at sea take heed!” Vinnie shouted into the roaring rush. Over the cliffs they could see darkness against dimmer dark. The stars lit the sky, and illuminated a shattered, heaving, black ocean.

“This is a night for dark deeds!” Sonny called over his shoulder.

Vinnie’s grin felt feral.

His hair whipped back. His ears instantly froze. He wondered how on earth, in this weather, he’d forgotten his fucking cap.

The air stung of salt. The strong gusts literally blew them through their front door. Once they closed it, the silence was a shock. Both men were breathing hard.

Sonny looked a disheveled mess. His bangs, longer than normal, criss-crossed in every direction against his forehead. His dark eyes held more light in them than Vinnie had seen in a long, long time. And there was a spring to his step that hadn't been there earlier in the day.

Just seeing that, an energy surged through Vinnie. The electric delight of Sonny. The contagion of it.

Sonny disappeared into the bathroom. Vinnie went into the bedroom. There he hung up his jacket and started lighting the candles. He did it because he liked the effect. Candlelight, and the refined scents of bayberry, cranberry, pine made him feel as if the room became more of a sanctuary, a place of refuge and rest. Though he never said it, Sonny seemed to like it, too. Vinnie bought the kind of candle that came in big, glass jars. They burned out on their own after drowning themselves in melted wax, but were ready for another go the next night. He didn't have to replace them. There were five in all, one on each nightstand and three on the headboard shelf.

Tonight he left the whiskey cask alone. They'd had enough. He didn't think they needed anymore right now.

The maid had been in earlier in the day. The sheets were stiff and clean as Vinnie turned down the spread. There were extra pillows, as they'd requested. The other bed across the room remained untouched. It hadn't been slept in since their first night of arrival.

Next Vinnie went to the thermostat and turned up the heat. He heard Sonny leave the bathroom and go into the kitchen. Vinnie took his turn, then came back to the bedroom only to find Sonny there, pulling his sweater over his head. He sat down on the side of the bed and took off his Rolex, placing it on the nightstand.

Vinnie moved around the bed, disrobing as he went. When he was down to his shorts, he piled his clothes in a chair and slid in under the covers.

Sonny was still fluffing his pillows. Then, clad in black tank and shorts, he leaned back, pulled his side of the covers over himself and clicked off the lamp.

The candles flickered, making the room glow gold. The wind soared and moaned over the roof of their little house. But it seemed they were cocooned in a nest of spun flax and flame and spangled spark. The covers were soft and cozy. And Sonny was a flaring source of heat beside him.

Vinnie sighed. The wind hustled and rushed, sometimes sounding as if it argued with itself, then calling out in some wordless, alien language.

“God. Listen...”

“I know,” Sonny replied in the soft dimness.

“I love it.”

“Me, too.”

“It’s like it’s expressing a part of myself that’s deep and immortal and always searching. It makes me feel endless, but also sad.”

Sonny turned, moving closer to him. Under the covers their arms brushed. “It makes me feel the same way. But why sad?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe because it’s always roaming and never finding what it’s searching for.”

“The thrill is in the hunt, isn’t it?” Sonny’s voice was low, thoughtful.

Vinnie turned his head until he could meet Sonny’s flickering eyes. “Hell yeah.” He smiled.

Sonny smiled back.

Vinnie reached out, ran his thumb gently down the side of Sonny’s face, then said, “If I kiss you, will you kiss me back?”

Sonny did not flinch, which was such a good thing. And even better was his answer. “Hell yeah.”

Vinnie cupped his hand on the side the Sonny’s face and leaned in. When their lips touched his body felt the flare and fullness of Sonny’s warmth. When Sonny opened his lips beneath his desire began its thrumming wave that started to surge over his entire body. He’d never wanted someone so much in all his life.

His hand moved a slow caress toward Sonny’s shoulder. His mouth and tongue tasted rain and heat and salt and sweet. Sonny’s arms came around him, pulling him in, pulling him closer.

Then all of a sudden Sonny’s body stiffened. Vinnie felt through the thin cotton tank the slimness of Sonny’s body, the hardness of the stiffening muscles as Sonny jerked his head back, as his body started to shake.

Now he was gasping, but he didn’t push Vinnie away. His head flopped back onto his pillow. He looked up into Vinnie’s eyes.

Vinnie said imploringly, beyond bereft now, “Babe, you gotta tell me what’s going on. It can’t be about what you said before. Because we talked about that, didn’t we?”

Through shuddering breaths, Sonny said, “I have to know what you see when you look at me, Vinnie. I can’t stand it anymore. What did you see?”

Vinnie thought very hard, tried not to frown. Really, it was two questions. What did Vinnie see now. And what did Vinnie remember of...the Incident.

Eyes half closed, Sonny looked at him and waited.

“You mean...that day.” It was not a question.

As Sonny nodded, his eyes shut tight. Vinnie stared at that shuttered face still clutching the trembling, slender body.

“Fuck, Sonny. If that’s all, I can tell you. I will tell you everything.”

Sonny’s eyes stayed closed, tight dark-lashed lines.

“You want to know what I saw? Okay, then.” He took a deep breath. “Christ. It was you, Sonny. In full form. Fucking hyped up like a fucking sun about to explode. You, so full of piss and vinegar and roaring wind and black, raging seas all balled up inside you and ready to be unleashed. Fuck. It’s always there.” He pressed his palm flat to Sonny’s chest. “It’s right there, just under the surface. It makes you...you fucking glow. Fuck, Sonny, you called Patrice a gelding to his face!” Vinnie started to laugh. “I thought I was dreaming. You fought harder than anyone I’ve ever known. You make Ali look cheap. Christ, you’re the bravest person I’ve ever seen. You saved me, Sonny. I know you did it on purpose. I couldn’t have done it. I couldn’t have. You never gave up. Until you started yelling, fighting..., Sonny, I already had.”

Slowly, Sonny opened his eyes. His breath still shook, but less now. His body was slowly quieting.

The wind shouted and cried overhead.

Vinnie stared into those golden-brown, depthless eyes, adding, “I saw *you*, Sonny. It was all you.”

“Vinnie...”

Vinnie brushed his lips against Sonny’s cheek. “You’re still you, Sonny. They never touched you. What I saw... They never even came close.”

Sonny rose up then, clasping Vinnie so hard that the breath whooshed from his lungs. He pressed his face to Vinnie’s neck, kissing, licking, then went still as if he were listening for something, his pulse maybe, the drum of his heart, or maybe Vinnie’s own coiled wind that made him so often on edge, alert, ready for a challenge.

Then Sonny came up, pressing his palms on either side of Vinnie's face. In a strange, almost frantic whisper, Sonny said, "You mean more to me than..." He stopped, started again. "It's because you're the only person who has ever seen me. You see *me*."

Vinnie replied, "Baby, I always have."

The breathing had quieted. Sonny's body was still against his naked chest. The hands now framed his face as Sonny hovered over him. Slowly, Sonny leaned down. His lips brushed Vinnie's and then Sonny was kissing him deep, long, hard. And everything Vinnie thought he was... tough, hard, nonchalant, daring, stubborn, cold...melted away in the onslaught of Sonny's bright love.

*

SONNY

At thirty-five, I thought I knew something about love. I thought I knew the crossroads, the pitfalls, the ecstasies, the thrills. All temporary, of course.

But then I met Vinnie. And I realized, until him, I'd known nothing. Nothing at all.

The surprising edges, the soft undertones. The intricacies of a single look. The supernatural experience of a moist kiss on the hollow of a cheek. The storms and the howls, the tides and the floods.

Real love. I was brought down by it. Then, just as quickly, lifted up.

Really, though, I don't know how I could fall in love with a fucking cop. And a guy. It was not my style. But then what was my style? I liked nice things and dangerous deals.

Vinnie said things to me no one had ever said before. And he always surprised me. Always. Whether it was his secret job or empathy for the enemy, he always intrigued me. He kept me aware. Kept me interested.

That's why I did what I did that day. I didn't even think about it. Protecting Vinnie. It was a hunter's instinct...a lover's choice.

Tonight he told me, "You never gave up."

He was right, of course. I just had to be reminded of that.

"They never touched you, Sonny. They never even came close."

Those words brought back the proper memories. And it was with those words that, in return, he saved me.

Candlelight bronzed his skin making him shine. I couldn't stop my hands from going to his face, framing it. He had the most beautiful eyes. In that moment I needed to know he was mine. More than anything I wanted that man yielding, smiling, pressed indelibly into my soul.

The wind surged overhead in its knife-cold hunger. It gasped and sighed. Ran mad from the ocean and through the woods. You could hear it tempting, provoking in the furious violence of an unfulfilled appetite.

I leaned down. Sank my lips into his mouth. He opened. He pulled me in.

Vinnie reached out and brought me fully on top of him, spreading his legs, clamping his arms, surrounding me, holding me. I felt him harden against me in unchecked desire. My own body burned.

We'd never gone this far before. But it wasn't because we didn't want to. It was because we both knew...after this...after unleashing something this powerful, there would be no going back.

I felt his hands on my back, stroking, almost clawing. I could almost feel the wings. The hunter flew through the wind-swept night. We flew in each other's arms.

He pulled my shirt gently over my head, ran his hands over me, stopping to stroke the scars, the past injuries, making them disappear. He pushed up, pushed me on my back, then moved his hand delicately, boldly, under my shorts. He tore them away and found every place, every wound in me, and stroked all pain into non-existence.

I was pure flame then. The blood rushing through my veins echoed the power of the wind.

His hands told me things no one had ever told me before. His kisses all over my body sealed the contract.

No, there was no going back now as the room filled with exploding stars, their glittery pieces falling all around us and into the candle flames. We rolled back and forth, clutching, kissing, legs entwined.

Where did it end?

I remember him, later, digging his chin into my shoulder, laughing at something stupid I'd said. I remember his thick lashes brushing the side of my jaw as his eyes shut and he fell asleep breathing hotly into the hollow of my neck. I remember looking up and the ceiling was suddenly transparent. I could see the stars swaying in the wind.

Where did it end?

It never did.

*

October 31, 2010