

TO SERVE AND PROTECT

by

Natasha Solten

*“ in the secret places
where what ends meets what is starting...”*

■ Juan Ramon Jimenez

Sid finally exited Sonny’s office much to the collective relief of Sonny and Vinnie, who both stood shaking their heads, simultaneously sighing their mutual exasperation. Sid left a kind of weasely smell on the air, which made Vinnie’s nose wrinkle.

Sonny said, “I wanna throttle that guy so bad.”

Vinnie said, “How do Harvard guys get to be such morons?”

Sonny turned. “Not like those Fordham guys, right?”

Vinnie shot him a wry, closed-mouthed grin.

Standing in front of the glass desk, Sonny’s gaze lingered on him and Vinnie watched with perhaps too much pleasure as those lips formed into what Vinnie had come to think of as *his* smile—the smile Sonny reserved for him and him alone. Sonny’s scowl could be damning, his grin exciting, but that smile was intoxicating like a warm brandy buzz. When it was the real thing it affected Sonny’s eyes, too, making them more gold than brown, making them seem to sparkle. Then the gaze would drop easily and lightly, taking in Vinnie’s entire form before moving back to light again on Vinnie’s face. He wasn’t even sure Sonny was conscious of the fact that he often did that—gave Vinnie the once-over—taking in the whole picture.

At first Vinnie had told himself Sonny was just appreciating the suits he’d bought him, seeing what his money had paid for. But Sonny did it when Vinnie wore his jeans and leather jacket. Sonny did it every day that Vinnie walked into his office.

Vinnie had watched Sonny with other guys and he didn’t do it to them unless they were strangers at a dangerous meeting. Then all the guys assessed the other guys, but they were looking for weaknesses, for weapons. And with women, when he did it, it was different, more

lewd. Sonny barely ever glanced at Sid, which was understandable, and in the garage the other drivers and guards seemed to hold no interest for Sonny except whether or not they were doing their jobs. Of course Sonny had known those guys for a long time. Maybe familiarity created a more take-them-for-granted attitude. Vinnie was newer, not as trusted, perhaps. Vinnie was a known street hood. Maybe Sonny was simply looking after him, making sure he wore his tie right or didn't have his suit jacket on inside out.

But then, more times than not, came that smile. It was next to impossible not to be drawn in by it. And Vinnie was. Drawn more and more each day, inch by inch, like he was a big fish being reeled in slow and steady. By soft curving lips. By dark eyes that glittered gold.

Vinnie had been working for Steelgrave Enterprises for months. But he realized the unique feeling between him and Sonny, and that special smile, had started from that very first day. The moment Sonny had smiled and put a hand against his back and said, "Come with me," it had all begun. The spark between them. Electricity. More than familiarity or simple generosity. It was as if they were made of the same cells, as if they matched on a level neither of them could yet understand or define.

At first Vinnie felt lucky. This was one more thing he could use to his advantage. A way to deepen his position for the perfect vantage from which to do his job. He saw it as a way to make him smoother, more efficient, and his dream of wearing that white hat, taking down the bad guy, became more obtainable, almost easy.

But later it wasn't easy at all. He found himself thinking less and less about that white hat dream and more and more about when he might see that smile again, or how he might go about encouraging it at will. For he'd come to love Sonny wholly, over time, the goodness and the badness, and it made him wonder what the hell he was doing every time he reported his daily dealings to Frank. It made him wonder at the fact that the job was no longer foremost in his mind. He found himself, on several occasions, actually defending Sonny to Frank, or bristling at anything negative Frank might quip about the man.

At one meeting, Vinnie said, "You don't know him like I do, Frank."

Frank replied, "What difference does that make?"

"None, I guess, except if you knew him you might not be so quick to call him evil, or judge him. You might see a little clearer that he's not all bad, that he's forced into certain positions where the outcome is preordained by circumstance."

"Wait," Frank said. "Don't tell me you're trying to justify his crimes?"

Vinnie knew it sounded bad, but he was fuming and not sure why. "Justice out of context isn't real justice."

"Vince, no one's asking you to be judge and jury. You're closing in on dangerous territory."

Vinnie felt suddenly frustrated when he said, “There’s far worse guys than Sonny in the organization. I’m just trying to be fair.”

“I hope I’m not hearing you wrong, Vince. Because last I heard, Sonny runs the organization....”

“Yeah, but...,” he stopped. He couldn’t find any words now to communicate what he felt. And he certainly couldn’t tell Frank about Sonny’s smile, the one reserved for Vinnie, and how it made Vinnie feel an electric thrill every time he saw it, how he anticipated it, how he did things to try to bring it on. He couldn’t tell Frank about gold sparkles in Sonny’s eyes, either, how they glittered when they slid down, then up his body as if taking him in in more than just a gaze. As if those eyes physically grasped, held, caressed. He couldn’t say any of that. Frank would never understand. In fact, Frank would probably consider him gender confused, if not completely, irrevocably nuts.

So he said nothing. And he gave Frank less and less information over time, making no excuses, but now feeling even more guilty for playing both sides of the fence.

But that smile.... It haunted something inside him. He would do just about anything to keep that smile coming, prolong this ride on the Steelgrave express.



It became second nature after awhile to protect Sonny. From the beginning he had enjoyed his job, but now it was more than that. Shadowing Sonny was natural as breathing to him, and though Sonny was a fiercely capable fighter and strong enough to take care of himself, he liked to keep his expensive suits spick and span, and he said he liked to keep Vinnie around for his strong right hook and his smart mouth. Vinnie knew Sonny was amused by him, impressed by him, and he hoped Sonny also sort of admired him the way Vinnie admired the strength and character of a guy who daily waded in darkness up to his ass but managed to embrace a lighter side of being. The edges of Sonny should have been hard and wholly cynical, but there were soft spots he allowed Vinnie to see, fringes of innocent wonder that were downright endearing. Sonny gave handfuls of bills to panhandlers. Sonny braked for cats and dogs crossing the road. Sonny tipped big and let store clerks “keep the change.” Sometimes, Sonny did impromptu little dances while walking through parking lots. In bars, if they’d had a sufficient amount to drink, Sonny might break into song—usually something edgy and dark, but sometimes light-hearted, too.

So Vinnie learned them all, the lyrics to Sonny’s favorites. It wasn’t hard because most of the stuff was already a favorite of Vinnie’s, too. He knew everything Sonny loved and shared in it. It was the job but it wasn’t. It was too damn fun.

“I swear to drunk I’m not God,” Sonny might say after too many cocktails. And then they would laugh and think of more phrases to twist up and drive the bartenders crazy.

It was easy. The job. And the instinct to protect. Until one night he failed and learned how deep his feelings really went.

They were out on a late night errand, coming home now, Vinnie driving the Porsche, when Vinnie decided to stop at a gas station. He didn't need gas, but his plan was to fill up and get a pack of smokes. He rarely smoked anymore. Sonny despised it. But he felt a sudden craving. He went into the mini-mart to pay while Sonny muttered something about getting a paper.

When Vinnie came out Sonny was gone. He checked the car, finding it empty. Turning in a kind of panic, he heard a muffled shout behind the building, and footsteps. He ran toward the sound, rounding the building, and almost tripped over Sonny who lay on the ground breathing hard and clutching his side just above his hip. He strained to get up, gave a frustrated, "umph," and fell back. There was blood on his mouth. One eye was already sporting a pink bruise, and more blood shone from his temple.

Vinnie dropped to the hard asphalt and put his hand behind Sonny's upper back to help him sit up.

"Should see the other guys," Sonny said between breaths. "Two of 'em. I think I hurt 'em."

"What the fuck happened?"

"I got jumped, whaddaya think happened?"

"Patrice?"

Sonny frowned, put his hand to his mouth, grimacing at the blood. "Don't think so. They took my watch and wallet." He looked at his hands. "Fuck! And my rings. That blue opal was my grandfather's. Dammit!" There was a vulnerability in his voice, a sudden broken hesitation.

"We should report it," Vinnie offered.

Sonny looked at him incredulously, his eyes glimmering with an unexpected hurt look. "Are you outta your mind? A waste of time. What cop would ever help me?"

Vinnie's body jerked at the words as if stabbed. He felt his heart turn over sickeningly. He reached out, steadying Sonny, feeling the slight tremble in the other man's arms, then said with an all too familiar tenderness of guilt, "Here, can you stand?"

Sonny did, and Vinnie helped him to the car.

Vinnie got behind the wheel, glancing at his passenger. "Is anything broken? You need an emergency room?"

"No. Just go home." The voice was cold.

Instantly, Vinnie listed his regrets. It was his habit these days. Why hadn't he been there? Why had he stopped in the first place? Sonny had gotten out of the car. It was Vinnie's job to shadow him. He should've suggested they both go inside, get Cokes or something. Anything to keep them at each other's backs...especially at night. And especially since Vinnie was carrying the gun tonight.

He drove quickly through the quiet black streets. Out the corner of his eye he saw Sonny pressing his palm to his forehead, then hiss softly, "Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Sonny took his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his mouth. "Ow." Then he threw the bloody silk on the floor.

Vinnie said nothing and was grateful when they arrived at the parking garage. He helped Sonny out, thinking it was perhaps worse than it looked because Sonny let him. Then they limped to the elevator.

Vinnie rode all the way to the top floor with him, leading him into the penthouse. He pulled Sonny into the bathroom and turned on the sink faucet, grabbing towels and washcloths.

Sonny looked around dazed, blinking. "Are there pink snowflakes in here?"

"Not that I can see," Vinnie answered quietly, placing a wet cloth against a bleeding cut at Sonny's temple. As he did, Sonny's eyes rolled up and his legs buckled.

"Hey!" Vinnie caught him. "Sonny?"

Sonny made a grab at the counter with one hand and a grab at Vinnie with the other. Vinnie held him firm, trying to prop him against the counter, as Sonny clutched at his jacket lapel with a strong fist.

"Ya gonna faint on me?" Vinnie asked softly.

Sonny blinked, tried to balance. The washcloth had fallen but the cut had stopped seeping. "Mmm, need to sit down."

Vinnie closed the toilet lid and propped him there. Sonny grabbed for him again, bending forward as Vinnie pushed Sonny's jacket off his shoulders and started undoing his tie.

Abruptly, Sonny began to laugh.

Vinnie got the tie off and looked down at him.

Sonny said, chuckling harder, “Ah, Vinnie, still so naïve. We should report this? Hah! Like call 911?” He took a breath. “Like any cop wouldn’t celebrate to see me like this....” The laughing stopped. He looked up almost pouting, his eyes narrowing to slits. “I can’t replace that ring. You think any cop would give a fuck about that?”

Vinnie met his eyes straight on, trying not to come completely unglued. “Then we’ll find those guys. We’ll get it back.”

“Yeah.” Sonny lowered his head, scowling. He tugged at his shirt pulling the tail loose from his trousers and yanking it up, exposing his side. His other hand shoved down at his waistband. On his side and hip a red and lavender bruise was darkening against the skin, flushing purple edged in green where the hipbone pushed the skin.

“Christ!” Vinnie said, reaching out but not touching.

Sonny said, “I think one of the guys had a brick in a sock. I ducked or my head would look this way, too.”

“It might help to ice that,” Vinnie said.

“I just want to go to bed.”

Vinnie helped him stand. Sonny limped a little less, reassuring Vinnie that truly nothing was broken. At the bed, a beautiful king in a master bedroom that was almost as big as Vinnie’s whole suite, Sonny shed his pants as Vinnie pulled the covers back. Sonny kept on his underwear and white shirt, and lay back, sighing loudly. “Fuck, what a night.”

Vinnie turned, then, stopping only when he heard Sonny ask, “Where’re you going?” The question sounded almost desperate.

“For aspirin and ice,” Vinnie replied. “I’ll be right back.”

“Yeah, ok, thanks.” All three words echoed with a tone of resignation.

Vinnie was back in two minutes with ice, aspirin and orange juice.

Sonny lay propped on fluffy pillows, eyes closed. They opened when Vinnie sat on the edge of the bed. He handed him the aspirin and the juice. Sonny took them willingly. “You didn’t bring the whiskey?” he asked, eyes widening like some innocent kid.

“Nope.” Vinnie had wrapped ice in a plastic bag and a towel. Now he lifted Sonny’s white shirt exposing his hip and placed the cold towel against the bruise.

Sonny said nothing, but his eyes closed and he turned his head half away.

“Just keep that there a few minutes,” Vinnie said, bringing the covers up to Sonny’s waist.

Vinnie stared at Sonny’s closed face. Something in his chest folded, unfolded. He said, “I should have been right there.”

“I just went for the paper,” Sonny said, voice low, eyes still closed.

“I let my guard down. I should’ve seen those guys loitering there.”

“Yeah, right. I didn’t see ‘em either. And you *were* right there. Within seconds. So shut the fuck up, will ya?” He grimaced again.

“Okay.” After a minute, Vinnie said, “Get some sleep.” He reached for the light.

Sonny turned toward him, opening his eyes. “You don’t have to leave yet....”

He was relieved at the request. Every fiber of him wanted to stay, to make sure Sonny was really okay. Watching over Sonny...it was second nature.

“All right,” Vinnie replied. “I’m staying. Mind if I just sit next to you?” He asked boldly.

Now Sonny did it. Gave him that gift of a smile. Shone that little bit of gold light on him. His eyes flicked down, then up Vinnie’s form. “I’d mind if it was anyone but you,” he said with a soft sigh.

Vinnie smiled back, trying not to read anything into those words but failing with a sigh of pleasure, and settled closer to Sonny, sitting up against the headboard. He touched the towel full of the bag of ice. “Keep that on there one more minute.”

“Thanks,” Sonny said.

Later, Vinnie put the ice aside, drew up the covers to Sonny’s shoulders, and sat on top of the bedspread. Still leaning against the headboard, he reached to the bedside table and turned out the light. The room disappeared. Everything disappeared but the sound of Sonny’s breathing, and the palpable heat of him beside him. Vinnie stretched out his arm over the mess of pillows at Sonny’s head. He didn’t touch Sonny, just made a loose circle with his arm. Then he leaned back and closed his eyes, wondering which part of him held the strongest instinct and desire to help this notorious guy, the cop or the man. He decided it was a lot of both. But somehow that wasn’t much comfort.

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Vinnie had dozed off but something woke him. For a moment he forgot where he was, darkness enveloping him. Then he heard a grumble beside him, felt movement, and full memory returned.

“Sonny?”

“God fucking dammit!” Sonny thrashed, breathing hard. Then he said, “Vinnie?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you still here?”

“You asked me to stay.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Did you have a nightmare?”

“Something like that.” Sonny moved the covers back, tugging at them where Vinnie still sat. “Gotta get up.” He crawled, moaning, out of the bed. When he returned, Vinnie had turned on the bedside lamp on its lowest setting. He watched affectionately as Sonny, clad only in white shirt and white briefs, crawled over Vinnie’s feet and got back into the bed.

Sonny muttered, “Those goddamn guys were chasing me all over hell and back, or I was chasing them. I forget.” He sat next to Vinnie, sitting up, and spread his ringless fingers in front of him, shaking his head. “Never a cop around when you need one, not even in my dreams.” He turned his gaze on Vinnie, eyes sparking but not in a good way.

Vinnie impulsively grabbed one of Sonny’s outstretched hands. “I’ll make it my business to find those guys. I’ll get that ring back.”

“You’re insane.” Sonny’s laugh was sharp and harsh. “Don’t go getting yourself in trouble again, Vinnie. It’s not worth it.” That last sentence was spoken with such an air of defeat that Vinnie felt suddenly hollow, like he just wanted to grab Sonny and clutch him and never let go. But this was the life Sonny led. High highs, low lows. It was the nature of dwelling in the shadows.

He expected Sonny to pull his hand away but instead Sonny grasped back, turning to him. “You know, I need a vacation, that’s what I need. Away from Sid and Pat and everyone else who wants a piece of me for nothing. Away from this whole goddamn city.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea right now. Things are too hot.” Vinnie felt Sonny’s grip tighten and hoped his palms weren’t sweating too much.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Besides, who’d run things?”

“You could.”

Vinnie jolted. Sonny still gripped him hard. “I’m not even “made” yet,” he protested.

“Yeah, but you’re tough. I wish I’d met you years ago. You wouldn’t be such fresh meat then.” He gave Vinnie’s hand a tug and winked, then let go.

Vinnie felt his insides warm. “Sonny, most of your guys don’t even like me.”

“They’re just jealous ‘cause I like you.”

Vinnie smiled and Sonny’s face seemed to open, his eyes wide, his special smile coming back. That vulnerability that softened Sonny’s edges, that was such an odd part of him considering how he’d grown up, showed full on, made him look suddenly years younger...boyish.

Vinnie kept smiling as he spoke. “I guess being liked by you is all that matters. You’re the one who is boss.”

“Yeah.” He sighed, edges softening even more. “That reminds me. You can’t tell anyone I got mugged. It’d fuck me over...my rep and all.”

Vinnie thought if anyone found out he was a cop that would end Sonny all by itself. The OCB wouldn’t have to lift a finger. Sonny’d be out, probably pushing up cement daisies at some old construction site.

“I’m not saying anything to anyone,” Vinnie agreed.

“Thanks.” Sonny looked down at himself, grasped the tail of his shirt and pulled it up, revealing side, hip, and a surprisingly flat stomach considering all the drinking he did. His other hand pushed down on the waistband of his briefs. Vinnie saw that the ugly bruise had widened and sported nearly all the colors of a rainbow.

“Jesus,” he said, pushing out his breath in shock. He rose. “I’ll get more ice.”

When he returned, Sonny still lay in the same position, head propped against pillows and headboard. His hand lay palm down on his hip. His shirt rode high. That side of his underwear was pushed to his thigh. The band stretched against his groin revealing the beginning of a modest thatch of black hair.

Vinnie put more ice in the bag in the towel. Sonny moved his hand away and said nothing as Vinnie moved to place the towel over his hip. But this time he touched him first. He couldn’t help himself. It was automatic. He was feeling for broken bone—something.

He knew if anything was really broken, Sonny wouldn’t even be able to walk. But he still lay his hand gently against the smooth, hot skin.

Sonny's eyes opened and his leg twitched. He stared at Vinnie before finally saying, almost accusingly, "What?"

Vinnie removed his hand but let his palm lightly caress as he did so. It was a bold move but Sonny said nothing. Then he put the cold towel against the bruise. He looked at Sonny. "The skin is so hot. You should see a doctor."

Sonny shook his head.

Vinnie lay his hand on the towel, just holding it there.

Sonny was quiet a moment. Then, "I should get you 'made.' I shoulda long before now," he mused.

Vinnie said nothing. Frank would faint from shock, probably, when he told him. The OCB would more than likely give him a fucking medal when it was all over. But right now all he felt was a tenderness for Sonny that caused him to alternate between wanting to grab him and wanting to get the hell out, leave and never see anyone named Steelgrave again for as long as he lived.

"What do you say, Vinnie?" Sonny's wide, bright eyes...it was too much.

Vinnie's skin went cold, then hot. He had no voice, just struggling breath, and his own warming eyes fixed on Sonny's. It was absolutely unbelievable...this image, this man in this bed beside him carrying a torch of utter trust that outshone the very sun itself.

"Vinnie?" Concern. A little worry. A lot of affection. All three contained Sonny's voice. "Vincenzo," he teased. "What do you say?"

Vinnie swallowed hard. Sonny spoke his names like they were poems.

Finally, he stuttered. "I haven't been here long enough."

"Six months," Sonny said. Sonny leaned toward him, touching him lightly on the arm.

Vinnie's hand pressed harder on the towel. "I..."

"Shut up, then. It'll be done."

Vinnie looked down, away from those dark eyes. Without warning, Sonny leaned toward him and lightly rested his shoulder against Vinnie's shoulder, his hand still touching Vinnie's forearm. Before he could stop the impulse, Vinnie leaned his head down until his cheek touched the upper side of Sonny's head. Then he turned his face and gave Sonny a quick kiss right above the temple hairline. It was a Terranova family gesture. Almost automatic. Their mother did it to them. Pete did it to Vinnie even as adults, mostly around family gatherings like Christmas.

Sonny did not move, except for his hand which gripped Vinnie's forearm tighter. Vinnie kept his other hand on the ice-filled towel, pressing, amazed that Sonny hadn't completely freaked out. He shouldn't have done it. It was one thing for family to show teasing affection like that. But Sonny might not understand.

Still, Sonny seemed quite uncharacteristically relaxed.

They stayed in that almost embrace for long minutes. Then Vinnie moved and lifted the ice off Sonny, saying, "You'll get frostbite if it's left too long." He covered him with a blanket, trying not to notice that Sonny had become flushed, that his briefs strained a little harder at the waistband. He tried not to remember how satin smooth the skin was on Sonny's flat abdomen at his hip, tried not to feel the added warm weight on his forearm where Sonny's hand still lay as Sonny shifted further down in the bed, letting the covers fall over him and finally letting go of his arm.

Vinnie turned out the light and shifted downward himself. Then, knowing it was a strange move but wanting...deciding to do it anyway, he turned onto his side facing Sonny and lay a protective arm over the blanket partway across Sonny's waist.

He expected Sonny to jerk away, but nothing had gone as expected this night. Instead, Sonny leaned slightly into Vinnie and said, almost flatly, as if to hide some emotion he wasn't ready to express, "You can get in if you get cold."

Vinnie said, "Sure." He closed his eyes letting the weight of his arm embrace the enemy.

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Just before dawn, when the sky seemed darker and the coldest it had been all night, Sonny woke. He felt Vinnie next to him breathing a little erratically. Vinnie's arm still lay heavy on his ribs. He liked the weight. It felt like a shield...like now he was impervious to everything, darkness, nightmares, Pat the Cat, random muggings, two-bit hoods, the snakes in his own organization. With Vinnie always around, it was like being on the team he'd always wanted both in business and in pleasure. The guy was a fucking dream come true. Almost too good to be true.

He tossed that last thought on the back burner.

He couldn't see Vinnie in the dark, but he could remember that when Vinnie's eyes closed the thick black lashes made his eyes into broad lines against smooth, light olive skin. Vinnie's hair was slick and glossy, and so thick, his brows like straight thick lines accenting his handsome, chiseled features. His lips always seemed to form the perfect, knowing smile. Vinnie was wearing a white shirt and dark blue silk pants that narrowed at his slim waist, making his chest and shoulders look wide, strong.

He'd probably have double that gorgeous five o'clock shadow by now, darkening chin, lower cheeks, upper lip.

Sonny reached out from under the blanket and touched Vinnie's arm where it lay against him. Then he slid his hand along that arm and touched the top of Vinnie's hand, bare skin with a subtle ripple of veins just beneath the surface. Sonny's own skin grew hot as he remembered Vinnie touching him. Even though it was the bruise he had touched, it didn't hurt. Not for one second. Then Vinnie had kissed him on the side of the head. That had been unexpected, but desired. He had wanted to grab him right then, but held back. Vinnie seemed open to everything Sonny had ever wanted, but this was not something he cared to navigate lightly, not this feeling, not this kind of closeness. Too fast meant too scary. Too scary meant everything could be ruined between them by one errant gesture. They could even be killed for it. He couldn't risk it.

He realized, as he mused, that Vinnie's hand was cold. He turned, bumping the arm, jostling the other man. Vinnie breathed in suddenly, and Sonny could hear him slowly waken. Though blanket and inches separated them, Sonny could feel Vinnie shivering.

"Get under," he said, "you're freezing."

Vinnie moved, then said sluggishly, "What?"

"C'mon. Move." Sonny tugged at the covers under Vinnie's weight. Vinnie rolled away and Sonny grabbed them all in one tug and lifted them over both of them. Sonny laughed as Vinnie rolled back toward him. "Jesus, you can't fetch me breakfast in bed if you're a solid block of ice."

He heard Vinnie chuckle. "I wasn't cold till you woke me. And if I get you breakfast, who's going to get it for me?"

"Fine," Sonny answered. "We'll call room service and have them serve us both."

"Make it one of Sid's job descriptions. Breakfast in bed or we send you packing back to the Cat."

"Bring Pat in to do it. Force him to do the dishes, too, while you stand there making sure he does it properly wearing that tux of yours he seemed to like on you so well."

Vinnie said, "Eh, I hate that guy! He makes my hair itch."

Sonny tried to mimick Pat. "I don't mind, Vincenzo, that you drove one a my cars into a ditch, and smashed my man's head into a truck."

Vinnie took up the dialog, flattening his voice. "This isn't a personal thing, Vincenzo. You really carry a black tie well."

Sonny threw back his head laughing. Vinnie fell on the soft pillows giggling like a kid. Sonny loved hearing him laugh like that. Vinnie was often so serious. It wasn't that Vinnie lacked a sense of humor, it was just that Vinnie sometimes held back. Sonny could feel it. Even though Vinnie offered so much, there was still sometimes a sudden pall that came over him, like

for no reason all the blood would drain from his face leaving him looking lost or momentarily confused. It always passed quickly, but Sonny noticed. He had wondered if it had something to do with Vinnie's time in prison, or something concerning his family and how easily embarrassed he was around them concerning what he did for a living. It was a strange thing to observe in a man who the very next moment would not hesitate to draw a gun, or insult someone who'd just made a dire threat, or who followed odd leads until he found traitors under the most obscure rocks. Vinnie seemed to be afraid of nothing, but those times of quick hesitation made Sonny wonder what haunted the man. What drove tiny spikes of pain into those intense blue eyes he could read so well? He wanted to ask. So many times he almost had. But something stopped him every time. Some instinct that came from god knew where told him to shut up, keep quiet.

Sonny's laughter subsided. He liked Vinnie being there. It felt just fine, like the way things always should be. What that might mean flooded him with apprehension, but he tried to block it, not think straight on about it. He just loved the guy, and that was that.

"After that," Vinnie said, voice still holding what sounded like a grin, "how can we ever face Sid in the morning? We'll laugh in his face."

"We don't have to. Tomorrow's Saturday."

"Good thing." Vinnie chuckled again.

"He'd have a stroke if he saw us now," Sonny said quietly.

Vinnie was silent a moment. Then he said, "Let him."

Sonny sighed. There was no seeing Vinnie's face in this blind darkness. Vinnie's bent knee bumped Sonny's thigh, then straightened. Sonny heard him take a breath, then speak. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." Sonny waited.

There was that hesitation again. He could imagine Vinnie looking down, away, hands curving into fists. The voice did not hold any grin now. "Why did you bring me here?"

"What? You came up here with me. I asked you to stay, but..."

"No," Vinnie interrupted. "I don't mean tonight. I mean after we fought, after you knocked me down in the warehouse. Six months ago. You just took me in. That first day. You gave me everything."

"You needed it. You had nothing."

"I'm asking why. Why me?"

Sonny's thoughts froze. He couldn't answer. It wouldn't make sense.

Finally Vinnie spoke again. “Do you know why?”

“Something about you.” This was frustrating as hell. “I don’t know!”

“Yeah, okay.”

Sonny thought hard a moment. “You gave in, but it wasn’t just that. It was the way you did it....”

“What do you mean?”

“The way you looked at me. Making sure I knew you were giving up. You let me beat you, but I didn’t beat you at all. You had me. You controlled the whole fight from the very beginning. That got my attention. Which is what you wanted, right? So I thought, ‘Give the guy a chance. He’s got balls enough to face me. See what he can do.’ It’s how I am. It drove Dave crazy all our lives. He hated that about me, said I was always looking for the deeper stuff when it didn’t matter. People think I’m cold. Well, Dave was a caring father, a good family man, but he was carved from ice. I’m heat. I think I run more on passion. Dave thought it would get me killed quick. But he’s the one who’s dead. And I’m still here.” He didn’t realize until he said the last word that his voice had quavered at the end. He usually didn’t babble on this much unless he was really drunk.

Vinnie surprised him by returning the musings. “My brother was like that, always telling me I took things too much to heart, that I was always whining about things not being fair. He’s always been so sure of himself. Me, just when I think I’m sure about something, everything crashes down around me.”

“Is that what haunts you, Vinnie?”

“What?”

Everything inside him told him not to elaborate. But he did. “I can see it in your eyes sometimes. Like something’s going down and you’re gonna suffer for it.”

“You see that?”

Sonny ignored the amazement in Vinnie’s voice and continued. “Like you’re already atoning for something that hasn’t happened yet.”

“I was raised Catholic....”

“It’s not Catholic guilt, Vinnie.”

Suddenly there was a hollow emptiness next to him, as if Vinnie had already left, disappeared. Their easy rapport vanished. Desperate not to create a rift, Sonny said, “Hey, Vinnie. It’s only me. We won’t talk about it anymore, okay?”

Vinnie did not answer.

“Okay?” Sonny repeated. “Remember when I told you I’d trust you forever?”

Vinnie made a small sound that sounded like, “Ah.”

“Hey, you’re like me. Thought runs deep. It can make you a little on edge. I get it. I still trust you. But if you question every single thing you do, it will eventually drive you crazy.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying these things to me,” Vinnie almost whispered.

“Why? Am I wrong?”

Vinnie’s breath came out in a loud puff. “No, you’re real close,” he said flatly.

Sonny wondered what that might mean, hoping he’d find out some day. Vinnie was intriguing. Compelling. Sonny could not get enough of him. But that would take more doing.

Changing the subject, Sonny said, “Are you warmer now?”

“Yeah....”

Sonny heard more hesitation, and a kind of almost breathy yearning in that one word.

Hearing Vinnie’s tone, noticing subtle inflections as if Vinnie wasn’t done, as if Vinnie wanted more...it had to be his imagination. Sonny was just thinking too much again. “All right then.” Sonny scooted down and turned half onto his side facing Vinnie, hoping to catch some more sleep before full dawn.

“Sonny?” He felt the covers bend, felt Vinnie move, but it was more over him than beside him.

“Yeah?” The air got warm over his face and Vinnie’s breath feathered against his forehead. “Vinnie?” A hand touched his face on the side, sending sparkles of heat through his entire body. He lifted his head, knowing Vinnie was right there, knowing they would collide.

Vinnie must’ve felt it. A second later, soft lips flattened against his, velvet, pressing but non-threatening. Then both Vinnie’s hands moved over his shoulders in an almost crushing, desperate grip.

Sonny thought: Jesus Mary Mother of God, who is this guy?

Head spinning, barely having any time to register his own astonishment, Sonny did what he'd been wanting to do for a long time. He grabbed him hard and pulled him down. Then Vinnie's mouth opened, the kiss turned demanding, and they were both lost.

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Vinnie knew he had not read Sonny so wrong, and was not entirely surprised when Sonny just grabbed him. His move to lightly kiss him was a reflex but such a risk. And then he suddenly couldn't hold back, realizing he was gripping Sonny's shoulders. He could not believe he had done what he'd just done. He could not believe he didn't have more control than that! And this was going to ruin everything!

But now, when Sonny clutched back tightly, opening his mouth in return, he wasn't sorry. That slow ravishing of Sonny's lips on his pressing harder, tongue dancing lightly between his...no, he couldn't be sorry. It was just not possible to be sorry about that right now.

The kiss was searing but sweet and took his breath.

If he had mused before about them being cut from the same cloth, simply from two different worlds, he was sure of it now. They were so very alike in the ways they responded to each other. So matched. So perfectly in tune. It was actually a little bizarre. He knew instantly where Sonny wanted to be touched and how. Every move he made was the right move. He couldn't guess wrong if he'd tried. And where Sonny touched his back, pushing his shirt up to feel bare skin, everything tingled and warmed. Sonny pushed forward. Vinnie pushed back. It was like being bestowed the gift of dance.

Sonny glided his hands up and into Vinnie's hair, stroking, bringing him in tight for more kisses. Then he moved his mouth down Vinnie's stubbled jaw, to his neck, lightly biting the soft skin. Vinnie felt himself surge and moan. He grabbed Sonny and pulled him onto his side so they were facing each other, moved his head down for another kiss.

Sonny stretched one arm under Vinnie's neck and let the other hand stroke his face, then his shoulder and back. Vinnie's hand, trapped between them, caressed Sonny's stomach under his shirt. Now Sonny moaned, shuddering.

For one moment, Vinnie worried about Sonny's bruised hip. But Sonny didn't seem to be feeling any pain at all as he twisted and turned over and under Vinnie, trying to get them closer, now tugging at Vinnie's pants. Vinnie was out of them in seconds and then avidly tearing at Sonny's stretch waistband, yanking those white briefs down and away. He heard Sonny laugh, felt Sonny's chest against his vibrate as they pressed together and held on to each other sinking amid overwhelming passion, lust, love.

This was no ordinary encounter. This was drowning. If either of them survived this, it would only be so they could attempt to consume each other again...and again. Because this was no sudden, drunken act. They wanted each other...had been wanting each other for quite some time. This could not be healthy for a mobster, or for a cop. What they were doing threatened not only their positions, but their very lives.

But as Vinnie grasped and stroked, and was clutched and caressed return, as they gasped, panted, moaned, he found he didn't much care. Sonny was all he wanted now. All he'd ever wanted his whole life. He just hadn't known it until now.

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Sonny woke with his cheek plastered to Vinnie's chest. It was the most uncomfortable position he'd ever fallen asleep in, and it felt great. The curtains did not keep out all the morning light and he lifted his head to stare at Vinnie, who lay with one arm still trapped under Sonny and the other flung toward the far edge of the bed. He was breathing softly. His eyelids flickered with the edge of dream before opening. The crystal blue eyes took a moment to focus, then stared back.

Sonny gave him a sheepish smile, then kissed him lightly on the lips.

Vinnie moved into the kiss easily, naturally, his out-flung arm coming up and over Sonny to embrace him. Enticing him even more, Sonny pressed his body closer, feeling Vinnie start to turn, anticipating the embrace to become more fierce, when suddenly Vinnie's body jolted and froze. Instantly, Sonny pulled back.

Vinnie blinked and the line between his eyes thickened but it wasn't a frown. It was more like worry, or fear or...pain? That was when Sonny saw it again...what he had seen on other occasions but not for more than a few seconds at a time. That flicker in Vinnie's eyes, like intermittent flashes of something...the word "agony" came to his mind but he thought he must be crazy to think that. After everything they'd just done and were possibly about to do again, what room was there for agony?

"Vinnie?"

Vinnie shook his head and his eyes moved away from Sonny. Closing up.

"Hey." Sonny grabbed him, shook him a little.

"Sonny," he finally said, almost under his breath. "This is too dangerous."

Sonny felt all the mirth he'd been feeling leave him at once. He felt the blood drain from his face. Vinnie was right. It was going to be hard. Maybe too hard. Men in the mob had been killed for less. But they didn't have to talk about that now, did they? His voice was sharp when he said, "I know that."

Vinnie swallowed hard. He looked like he was going to be sick.

"It's just gotta be kept our secret, right?" Sonny ventured, trying to sound less curt. He stroked Vinnie's shoulder lightly.

Vinnie was breathing funny, in little flutters. He said, "Then that makes two big ones for me now." His head lowered.

Sonny lifted himself up on his other arm, then moved his hand from Vinnie's shoulder to his chin. The stubble was rough, sharp, lovely. His thumb caressed him just under the lip as he tried to lift Vinnie's head to look at him again. "What two?"

Vinnie's eyes were swimming. He shook his head.

"You know you can tell me anything," Sonny said softly. But Vinnie just kept shaking his head.

Finally, Vinnie said in a whisper, "No. Not here. Not like this."

Sonny felt a sudden fear spike his stomach muscles. Fear made him angry. It always did. But with Vinnie it was different. He wasn't angry at him, just worried. "What are you talking about?"

"I can't say...."

"Just tell me." He rubbed his chin again.

"Sonny, I can't." He pulled back, sitting up. He was beautiful, his dark hair all pushed forward, his back taut, firm, gleaming, almost the color of old bronze. Sonny would place a healthy bet on the theory that when Vinnie got in the sun, his skin tanned to chocolate. It wasn't that he hadn't noticed Vinnie's looks before, just that now he had the time, the opportunity to take it all in. And Vinnie was ruining it.

"Jesus, Vinnie. Talk to me." Sonny sat up with him.

But all Vinnie would say was, "I have to go to New York. Will you come with me?"

"Sure. Yeah." Sonny was mystified.

"I have something to show you," Vinnie finished.

"Do we have to go now? Can't we wait maybe an hour?" Sonny touched his back.

"I have to show you this first," Vinnie said.

Vinnie got up and walked naked from the room. Disappointed, Sonny just sat there. Then he said, cursing under his breath, "What the fuck?"

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They got some breakfast on the drive, but it wasn't the cheery event Sonny had hoped for. Vinnie was so morose that Sonny started to take it personally.

"I'm not getting good vibes here," Sonny said, trying not to sound hurt.

"I know."

"I wish you'd just tell me what's on your mind. Wouldn't that be easier than this long drive, this....this hell?" He swept his arm up, indicating the diner.

"How are you feeling now?" Vinnie asked, changing the subject.

"Not great," Sonny replied testily.

He looked at Vinnie and saw that Vinnie was talking about his mugging. "I'm okay. I'll heal. But hell, Vinnie, you're driving me crazy. You like to see me crazy?"

"No. I don't."

"Well this is a hell of a way to spend a free Saturday together." He grabbed the bill and got up. "I'll pay this and meet you at the car."

Once in the car, Sonny turned the stereo up, but he didn't even hear the music. He figured neither one of them did. What was Vinnie doing? It was scaring the hell out of him and part of him wanted to refuse to go one more mile, to order Vinnie to just turn around and take him home. He wanted to say, *You got something to show me, then bring it to me. Don't make me go one step further.*

But he kept his mouth shut. He gritted his teeth. Instinct told him this was serious. The least he could do was stick by Vinnie's side...for now.

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Sonny recognized the church. It was Pete Terranova's parish. He'd only been there a couple times, but now he really was mystified. What could be here that Vinnie wanted to show him? Was it something about Father Pete? Something about his family?

Sonny turned to him. "Why'd you wanna come here?"

Vinnie didn't answer. He just got out of the car. Sonny followed. The air smelled like stale smog and church incense. *A lovely combination, Sonny's mind quipped sarcastically. I'll have to bottle that.*

They went to the entrance and Sonny said, "Can I wait outside?"

Vinnie turned to him, questioning.

Sonny said, "Vinnie, what are you gonna show me? Sweet Jesus on the cross? Some antique Holy Bible?"

"Since when do you not want to go into a church?" Vinnie asked, pain in his voice.

"Since now. Since you! You're acting strange. I've never seen you like this. I hate it. Let's go."

Vinnie looked like he was breathing funny again, so Sonny rolled his eyes, sighed and said, "Okay, fine." And Sonny led the way in, feeling like he was coming unglued, like his world had already ended and he didn't even know why. Maybe his imagination was getting away from him. Maybe it wasn't something so bad. But he knew better. Vinnie's eyes told him. They told the whole story. He just didn't know all the words yet, but it was there. Devastation. Ruination. Vinnie was no drama queen, so this had to be something pretty big.

Vinnie led the way through the church to a hall. There they met a priest that Vinnie obviously knew. Vinnie asked about Father Terranova. The priest said, "He'll be back in a few minutes. You can wait in his office."

Vinnie nodded.

When they entered, the first thing Sonny noted was how small the office was. There was a desk, a couch, a chair, some shelves, a closed cabinet that turned out to be a roll-top desk. It was the cabinet part of the desk that Vinnie went to. Sonny watched as Vinnie withdrew a lock box. He frowned. It was so small. So, what Vinnie had to show him was small. Not big. He took a breath.

From another hiding place, Vinnie came up with a key. He unlocked the box.

Nervous, Sonny put his hands in his pockets to keep from drumming them on the desk, or chair, or anywhere he could reach.

Now Vinnie withdrew something that looked like a driver's license. He held it for a moment, looking down, then turned and faced Sonny. "I promise you," Vinnie said with a kind of gentle force that stunned Sonny. "I promise I will never cause harm to come to you. I'll prevent it in any way I can. Remember that when you look at this."

It was an I.D. card. Sonny's throat went dry. Somehow, he already knew. Vinnie was going to tell him something about who he was. Who he really was. Sonny turned away just as Vinnie held it out. "I don't wanna look at that, do I?"

Vinnie came up behind him, put his hand on Sonny's shoulder. "You have to."

Sonny took a sharp breath. "You're a bastard, you know that?"

"I can't lie to you anymore," Vinnie said.

Abruptly, Sonny turned and snatched the card from Vinnie's hand. He looked down. But it was swimming. Hard to see. He made out a few letters, just enough. O.C.B.

Sonny didn't want to look up, but he did. Vinnie's blue eyes were shimmering. Sonny lifted his chin so his eyes were slits. Vinnie spoke. "You said no cop would ever help you, Sonny. Well, there is one."

"Ha? Are you kidding?" Sonny felt so confused and hurt he didn't know what to do. "How're you helping me if you're trying to take me down?"

"I...I..."

"How're you helping me if you aren't even really working for me? If everything about you is a lie? Jesus Christ! You did one better than take me down, Vinnie. You broke my heart!" He threw the I.D. on the floor and turned away.

Vinnie said, "Sonny...."

"See your own way through this world, Vinnie. And don't come back to me. If you do, I'll kill you." Sonny could not believe he'd just said that, but it was out before he could stop it. He headed for the door, then stepped into the hall and slammed it behind him. For a moment he just stood there, shaking. Sharp pains assaulted his chest. The hall was empty. A wooden bench lined part of the wall. He turned and sat abruptly on it, sat before he collapsed. His hands were shaking when he put them to his face.

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Vinnie sat on Pete's couch, elbow on the couch arm, upturned palm supporting his head. So, it was over. Don't come back, Sonny had said. Don't come back to me. Don't don't don't. Vinnie felt dampness on his face.

He knew Sonny wouldn't tell. Sonny had dismissed him. That meant he would pretend nothing had happened. And he knew Sonny wouldn't kill him, because he had threatened it. If he wanted Vinnie dead, Vinnie would already be a bloody mess on Pete's floor right now.

What he wanted and what could be.... The two didn't mix. But he had had to tell Sonny. He could not love him and keep that big a secret between them. It was impossible for him as a man and as a friend and as an agent of the law. It was, simply, unconscionable.

Thoughts plummeted through his brain so fast he couldn't follow them all. He'd have to call Frank. He'd have to probably stay with his mom tonight.

Oh God, Frank was going to kill him. He would be so pissed. But there was nothing Vinnie could do. He was only one man. Only human. He was out. Off the case. By his own hand. Maybe he'd be fired. Maybe he'd find another case. Maybe maybe maybe.

He tried very hard not to remember everything about the past night, but the more he tried the more everything came back, playing over and over in great detail, the feel of Sonny's lips, the deep rain-sweet scent of him, how he tangled his fingers in Vinnie's hair, how Sonny spoke to him so gently just before he had made Vinnie come.... "Vinnie, Vincenzo, I want you."

They hadn't "done" each other. They hadn't "fucked." To anyone with even a hint of a clear mind, it was obvious. They had made love. He'd never known it could be that good. Not with a woman. Not with a man. And he would never have believed it with Sonny if, months ago, someone had told him this was going to happen. Sonny had been generous, solicitous, affectionate from the very beginning. But this...this went further than ever anticipated. This had been...had been...magical.

Keeping things straight in his head in class, in field training, and then on the job...it had seemed easy. A task not too hard to follow. He'd had no trouble. So why now? Why were his emotions unable to stay out of the job? Maybe if he'd had more control. If he'd been harder, crueller, colder. But then a voice in his head asked, *Is that what you want for yourself, Vince? You'd be just like them, then, the guys you're sent to take down. You'd be one more cold sociopath on the road to isolation and damnation.* His answer to that little voice: *What's the difference since that's where I am now?*

He swiped at his face but it didn't help. He clamped his fists together so tight the fingernails cut into his palms. Still no help. He had no answers. If he could just make it through this one day, this one day, this one day....

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Sonny sat on the hard wood bench for long minutes seeing nothing, thinking nothing. A bitter rage filled him, but it wasn't the kind of boiling rage that made him what he was, a ruthless mob-king, the guy who saw things through, who got things done no matter what it took. This was different. It didn't boil. It didn't overtake him with a calculating coldness, the satisfying shiver of planning vengeance, like most of his rages. This rage was like being lost in a dark cave with no hope for light. This rage was like being told you were going to die and there was nothing, not a goddamn thing you could do. This rage was desperate, desolate, self-immolating. It took the breath right out of him. It made him want to faint instead of kick back, duck instead of hit. Because with this one he knew he couldn't win. And this feeling of defeat...if it didn't kill him, he didn't know what would.

Elbows on his knees, he leaned his forehead in his hands. He concentrated on breathing but instead kept seeing Vinnie's eyes...that agony. He'd seen it before. Why hadn't he asked? It could've saved them this. He could've demanded Vinnie spill his secret and then Vinnie would've been gone long ago. Those eyes. Vinnie had held onto that pain through all of it, all their adventures and escapades, all their shared breaks, lunches, dinners, the teasing, the banter, the evening drinking until they were nearly collapsed in laughter just for the joy of being. And then through all of last night.

At the thought, Sonny started breathing hard. Even then, Vinnie had known. While patching him up. While kissing him. While touching him. While...while...while participating in the things they'd done. But if Vinnie had known...even then...what did that say for him? For their love? He couldn't deny it. They loved each other. It would have been easy to find another word, an excuse for their behavior...but he knew the truth. So how could Vinnie love him and do that?

His breath caught. He knew it was why Vinnie had pushed him away this morning. Vinnie had felt it. The real thing. It wasn't all fake. It wasn't. It couldn't have been. Their feelings. It was why Vinnie had dragged him here. Sonny knew he had to face that, to know how hard that had been for Vinnie. But he didn't care. He wished, for a moment, that Vinnie hadn't told him. He wished that he and Vinnie had just decided to stay in bed for the day, not get up, not go into this fucked up world where nothing was what it seemed. At least in bed, at least there, they had just each other. It was two and just two. He wouldn't have to think. He wouldn't have to be afraid. He wouldn't have to worry, for that moment, beyond the confines of that bed. And this rage wouldn't be here now slowly shredding him fiber by fiber until soon there would be nothing of Sonny Steelgrave left but a husk, a skeleton, dust.

At that last thought, he heard footsteps in the hall and looked up. Father Terranova approached, confusion on his face. "Mr. Steelgrave?"

Sonny swallowed but somewhere along the way he'd lost his voice. He must've looked like some pissed off demon sitting there in Pete's church, face and eyes probably red, the injuries from his mugging prominent, his breath catching in his throat.

Pete looked suddenly panicked. "Has something happened to Vinnie?"

Sonny found his voice, scratchy, gravelly. "No, he's in your office."

The relief on Pete's face was instant. "Oh. So what brings you two here?"

Sonny stared at Vinnie's brother trying to see the family resemblance, any resemblance, but there was none. They couldn't have looked less like brothers than Laurel and Hardy. As he stared, a thought occurred to him. Father Pete knew Vinnie's secret. Otherwise, why would the lock box be here? At the realization, Sonny stuck his chin out and said, "Your brother is made of lies and you know it."

To his credit, Pete held calm. With conviction, he said, "Vinnie's a good man."

"Yeah." Sonny looked away. "If you make a life of lies, hurting even his poor mother, that's real good."

Pete shifted his feet. His black robe drifted back. "So Sonny, from where you sit, you can say you're the better man, then?"

Sonny looked sharply up again. "I don't pretend I'm not who I am."

“So that makes you right and pure.” It was not a question.

Sonny thought, *Vinnie isn't the only one with the smart mouth in the family.* He said aloud, “I never said that.”

Pete nodded. “I don't know what he told you. Or why. I have no idea what's going on. But if you have any feeling inside you at all, sir, please don't hurt my brother.”

Sonny stood then, fists clenching, unclenching. “I gotta go.”

“Please,” Pete said, taking one step closer. His eyes implored, but there was a touch of that Terranova aggression, too. “Promise me.”

Slowly, Sonny nodded. “I promise.” And he realized when he said it he meant it. He looked toward the closed door leading to Pete's office. Something strange happened right at that second. His rage subsided and he felt only a kind of empty forlornness, and a need to still try to fix things. Why? Why? Why?

But he knew why. It was Vinnie. And Vinnie was different from anyone he'd ever known.

He looked at Pete. “Can you give us a minute?”

Pete nodded.

Sonny opened the door and went back inside.



When Sonny re-entered the office, he saw Vinnie on the couch leaning on his arm. His face was hidden. But at the sound, Vinnie turned.

Sonny tried not to see his face, how fucked up he looked. He just went over to him and said, “C'mon, let's go.”

Vinnie shook his head.

Sonny grabbed his arm, pulling. “C'mon. I'm not gonna hurt you, man. We're going back.” He pulled a reluctant Vinnie to his feet. But Vinnie did cooperate. He stood, swaying a little.

“What're you doing?”

“I have no idea,” Sonny said, a kind of prolonged panicky pain fluttering his chest. “Just...let's go. Before I change my mind. I'll drive.”

Vinnie followed him out the door but stopped when he saw Pete. Sonny turned to watch them. Pete said, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Vinnie tried to duck his stare. "I'll call you later."

The look on Pete's face said he didn't believe him. He seemed to be shrewdly taking it all in, still not understanding but knowing things most certainly weren't okay.

Sonny looked directly at Pete. "You have my word. He'll call you later."

Pete nodded.

Vinnie said, "You two been talking?"

Neither answered. Sonny just kept walking, knowing Vinnie would follow.

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Vinnie got in the passenger side of the Porsche. As Sonny started the engine, Vinnie said, "You been talking to my brother?"

Sonny replied, clipped. "Just in passing."

"What did he say?"

"Not much to say."

Vinnie stared at his lap. "Something made you come back."

Sonny put the car in reverse and gunned it a little too hard. Vinnie waited. When they were on the road heading toward the turnpike, Sonny finally spoke. "I told him his brother was made of lies."

Vinnie nodded. "Great. That probably almost did him in."

"He's like you. Nothing phases him."

Vinnie ran a hand through his hair. "Whatever."

"He said you were a good man. Now coming from a priest I really should believe him. But it fucks with what I know, Vinnie. I can't think anymore. So we're just gonna drive for awhile, okay?"

He might kill me, Vinnie thought. But he knew it wasn't true. He just knew. Aloud, he said, "Yeah, okay."

For the next half hour they were silent.

When Sonny saw a pull-off, he took it.

He had been okay at first, driving on automatic pilot. But after about half an hour the road began to swim. He pressed his palm hard to his forehead. "I need a break."

Five minutes later he'd found the lookout point and parked. It was a good thing because he thought he was going to lose it in the next few seconds.

He got quickly out of the car and stalked away, toward a sign he couldn't read, a tree that looked like blotched watercolor, and a view that was...well, who knew what?

He heard the other car door slam, felt and heard Vinnie come up beside him. Sonny took a deep, rasping breath, still staring straight ahead. "So now I got two things my own people would kill me for in a hot minute. How ya gonna protect me from that, Agent Terranova?"

Vinnie said, hesitantly, "I don't know. But no one has to know those things."

"Secrets have a way of getting known one way or another."

"You guessed correctly about me once."

Sonny shook his head. "No. It was Sid. Sid guessed. I had to confront you to keep that fuckwad at bay." He looked at Vinnie now, trying to clear his vision but failing. His voice shook as he blurted out his errant thoughts. "In one night I get mugged, I lose my wallet, my jewelry, my pride. And then, that same night, you take everything else. Just like that. Everything, Vinnie! Everything! Don't you see?" He started to gasp. "Even my soul!"

"I didn't plan this!"

"But it happened. How do you do it? How do you sleep at night?" His voice broke. "How?"

Vinnie grabbed him, then, crushing him to him. Why Sonny let him, why he didn't fight him, he had no clue. But he wanted to feel those arms again. And he wanted Vinnie. It was that simple. In such a complicated, over-worked, over-stimulated, over-taxed world, it was, in the end, that fucking simple.

Then Vinnie said, clutching him tighter, "I didn't mean to. It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Shut up, Sonny thought. Vinnie must've read his mind, because he stopped talking and just held him. Sonny pressed his face to Vinnie's shoulder and let himself go, a kind of surrender; he just floated for a moment in that strong grip, Vinnie, Vincent, Vincenzo Terranova surrounding him, shadowing him, following him to the end of his days. He listened to his own breathing in, breathing out, to Vinnie's heart ramming his chest, Vinnie's lungs trying to match his own sharp breaths. He heard cars in the distance speeding by. But no one stopped. No one knew they were there. Couldn't they both just walk away together into that view and never be seen or heard again? Couldn't they?

But after awhile they were back in the car. This time Vinnie was in the driver seat.

Let's see how far he gets. The errant thought whispered through Sonny's mind.

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They stopped for gas once and Vinnie went inside to pay. He came out with Cokes and handed one to Sonny who hadn't realized how thirsty he was until then. When he drank it, he also realized he'd been craving sugar. It had been a long time since breakfast but he wasn't hungry in the least. Two and a half hours to New York, then back to Atlantic City made five hours on the road alone, not to mention their stops.

Vinnie got back in but didn't start up the engine right away. He turned to Sonny. "Are we going to the Royal Diamond?"

"Where else?" He looked Vinnie up, then down. How could he still want this man who'd destroyed his whole life? But there it was. More than possession. More than desire. More than lust. He wanted with his whole heart. He wanted all of Vinnie, hands, arms, legs, lips wrapped around him. He wanted Vinnie's heart, to feel it beating next to his own. He wanted them to breathe each other in, their thoughts, their words, their actions all tangling, spinning, sinking into each other until it felt like they were one person. He wanted in Vinnie. He wanted Vinnie on him, in him. He wanted them to laugh together again. He wanted, wanted, wanted.

He realized he'd been staring at Vinnie's lap as he thought all those things. He looked up. Vinnie was watching him with those wide blue eyes. There was still pain there. Maybe it would always be there. Maybe he could get used to it.

Vinnie said suddenly, "Stop. I can read your thoughts and they're driving me crazy."

Sonny glanced away, thumped against the headrest and looked straight ahead. For the first time a smile tried to curve his lips. It was a smug one, but it was a smile nonetheless.

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They made it back in one piece, which was a huge success considering what they were both going through. The private elevator stopped at Vinnie's suite and they both got out. Vinnie said nothing, but he figured maybe Sonny didn't want to go back to the penthouse quite yet, where everything had started.

Vinnie got out the orange juice and made a pitcher of screwdrivers, knowing that was one of Sonny's favorites. He brought the drinks to the couch, where Sonny sat drumming his knees with nervous fingers.

Sonny drank half his in one gulp then set it down. Vinnie sat.

Vinnie looked at him. Sonny was wearing casual dark brown trousers and a red and brown sweater with a pattern on it like clouds or something equally abstract. His hair was tousled, the bangs dark on his forehead, some of them sticking up, the individual hairs all glimmering. He looked for a single moment like an angel surrounded by the afternoon light, one who had just discovered he'd fallen even though the fall had happened a million years ago.

Sonny looked back, eyes dark as night. "What're you gonna do, Vinnie?"

"I don't know."

It was the wrong answer. Sonny bristled. His body tensed. "You don't know. You don't know! What do you know?"

Vinnie shook his head. "I'm sorry. I didn't plan this. I only knew I couldn't keep lying to you."

"Part of me wishes you had kept lying."

"But it was tearing me up," Vinnie argued.

"I don't care. Let it keep tearing you up. You did it to yourself."

Vinnie got up then, grabbed his drink and started to pace. He glanced at Sonny who was staring at his glass. Sonny looked sorry he'd said that, but Vinnie couldn't be too sure. Sonny was unpredictable...at best. And when he was hurt he tended to lash out like a little kid who'd become a man but really never grew up.

"I could quit my job and come work for you," Vinnie said quietly.

"Would you want to?"

Vinnie didn't answer. "But you'd lose your "in" then. With me in the position I'm in now right now, I can protect you better."

"That's bullshit! You're just telling yourself that to make yourself feel better!"

Vinnie kept pacing. "I've already done it several times. Skewed the evidence."

Sonny did not seem surprised or even grateful. "So you say."

“Why would I lie....” Vinnie stopped when he realized what he’d just said.

Sonny laughed coldly. “You are so fucked up.”

“Or I could leave. Go work other jobs. Never come back.” He said it like a threat.

“Yeah. You do that. The easy way out.”

Vinnie watched as Sonny got angry very fast. Everything he wanted to say was coming out wrong. Coming out not the way it should to placate Sonny. Maybe he should stop talking for awhile. He took a gulp of his drink and continued to pace.

“Quit that,” Sonny said. “It’s like watching a tennis match.”

Vinnie stood still, facing the couch.

Sonny glared. “And quit doing everything I tell you to do. Don’t you have a mind of your own? Tell me to fuck off, or something.”

Vinnie said nothing.

“Goddammit,” Sonny said, coming off the couch, moving to face Vinnie. “You don’t have to work. You could just live here. No one would care or see. You don’t have to work for me, you don’t have to work for them. You could do whatever you want. You could get into ceramics, write, play video games, watch fucking TV, do people’s taxes for all I care. That’s what you could do. That’s what you *should* do. Because after everything you’ve done to me, you can’t...you can’t leave me!” He bowed his head, then lifted it again, his eyes slits.

Vinnie watched it play out, the rapid emotions that ran through Sonny like storms at sea, bucking him, knocking him about, sometimes almost drowning him. Anger, fear, panic, love, desperation, desolation and too many more to count. He still said nothing.

Sonny said, loud, “You should do that for me!”

“Yes,” Vinnie finally said. “I should.”

Still that wasn’t the right answer, because a new rage swept over Sonny. “You’re still a liar. If you wanted to do that, if you really honestly did, you’d have already quit by now. But you’re not. You won’t quit for me. Because you’re a big fake. That’s all it is. You and lies and more lies. Everything about you is lies.”

Vinnie felt himself start to get caught up now. Sonny was and wasn’t making sense. Half the time he agreed with him. Half the time Sonny was right on the mark. But the other half.... “My feelings for you aren’t a lie.”

“No? How do I know? How do I know for sure?”

Vinnie glared. “You know. After last night....”

“What do I know about your job description? Huh? Maybe it’s all in there, in some playbook with a cute logo. Get into bed with them, make them fall hard.”

Vinnie moved away from him then, walking over to the back wall of the living room where every inch of wall space was covered with colorful, ornate, glass-covered abstracts. He tried to see them. Tried to understand why they were even there. Pictures hung on a wall to make a room pretty. *How odd*, he thought. It was like even everything here was fake. Pictures they didn’t understand hung on a wall to pretend to make the room look more livable, more civilized. But everything was a veneer of make-believe, a thin veil covering a mad, sad, wild world that pretended it was orderly and fashionable when really it was all chaos, all a grand colossal mess.

He turned and saw that Sonny had come up behind him. He felt completely lost, and pissed that Sonny would even suggest he’d get into bed with him for the job. “You think I faked all that? Fine!” Vinnie heard his voice rise. “Yeah, I did. Is that what you wanna hear? That first kiss, so smooth and nice, yeah, that was me faking all the way.” He felt his eyes warm and tried to go to a cold place, cold cold cold. “Yeah, and I faked coming! I faked it real good when I sucked your...” He never finished. Sonny punched him so hard on the side of the head that he flew back into the wall, into the silly abstracts. He heard glass shatter. As he bounced off the wall, something big hit him on the top of the head. Then glass was everywhere, raining on him as he lost his balance and finally hit the floor, which knocked the wind right out of him, his mind swirling with little white lights, his lungs empty, straining.

Stunned, he finally coughed and could breathe again. He realized Sonny was on his knees beside him. Sonny was holding him, one hand under his head, one on his shoulder. And Sonny was saying almost desperately, “Christ, I didn’t mean to hit you that hard!”

Gasping, Vinnie said, “I deserved it.”

Grabbing him harder, Sonny said, his tone completely different, new. “You deserve to be treated like a prince. Vincent, you deserve better than me.”

Vinnie coughed again, thinking he couldn’t have heard Sonny correctly. That was just too funny, because if anyone treated him like royalty, it was Sonny doing it for the past six months. “But Sonny, you’re the one I’m crazy for. I’m in love with *you*.”

Sonny kept brushing his hand over the back of Vinnie’s head. Vinnie leaned forward, trying to sit up. Sonny said, “I promised. I fucking promised your brother I wouldn’t hurt you.”

Vinnie balanced himself, one hand on Sonny’s thigh, the other on carpet that wasn’t completely covered in shattered glass. “I’m okay. But damn you hit hard.”

Sonny gave him a wry smile that didn't look too happy. "I promised a priest, Vinnie."

Vinnie felt himself smile. "Then you are well and truly fucked, Steelgrave."

"Fuck, just what we need, me tossing you around your apartment like some fucking handball. Can we even do this without killing each other?"

Sonny's words lightened the mood, but Vinnie couldn't let it go. He said, "Sonny, I didn't fake anything with you. Why do you think I risked everything to tell you? It's not because I'm indebted to you. It's just because I love you. I want you protected. And I don't know what else to do. They don't have a chapter on *that* at the academy."

"I don't get it," Sonny said. "Why don't you hate me, you moron? You should've just hated me from the very beginning."

Vinnie shrugged, trying not to grin. "You're fucking irresistible. Everything you do, it's like cream rising to the top even if it's sometimes dark underneath. I can't...I can't stop it. Christ, you're all I think about."

He had more to say, but it would sound dumb. He had a whole list, in fact. What was the allure of Sonny? Energy, charisma, strength, charm, poise, wit, heroic instinct, generosity, empathy, vulnerability and even that dark edge...it, too, was so enticing. It didn't hurt that Sonny was handsome, or that Sonny's dark eyes always held a hint of the mischievous child. Or that his gold skin was like touching rigid satin. Or that Sonny's smile, the one he reserved for Vinnie alone, was like Heaven peeking through a dark cloud. Vinnie had thought he was coming in to take on a psychopath. In reality, Sonny was nothing but a product of his society, sociopathic perhaps in some of the things he did, but not ruled by it. Sonny was not the evil Vinnie had been led to believe he was.

"Get up, damn you." But Sonny was smiling. He had Vinnie's hands in a tight grip now, was pulling him to his feet. "You can't say stuff like that. You can't say that stuff and not take the consequences. Me? Irresistible? Yeah, right. Prove it."

"But we haven't solved anything," Vinnie said hesitantly.

"Who cares? I got your back, you got mine, right? Let's go upstairs and you can show me why you can't stop thinking about me."

On the way out, Sonny grabbed the pitcher with the screwdriver concoction Vinnie had made. "A shame to let this go to waste," he said, as they got into the elevator.

Now Vinnie finally laughed, the way he liked to feel when he was with Sonny, loose and unconstrained, in total abandon.

They barely made it through the front door. Sonny set the pitcher on the floor because if he didn't it was going to spill everywhere. Then they grabbed each other, fierce, hard. It was

the end of both their worlds. If it was going to happen anyway, they should at least have a good time while things exploded around them. And if they lived through it, well, then they'd see what new things they could build. But for now it was Saturday night. They were going to live it up. Get lost in it. And not come up for air until dawn.