

UNDER OATH

A Wiseguy “/” story
by Natasha Solten

*...forever beyond the folds of sunrise
in the arms of the hunter...*

Like a dream in slow-motion. Everything black and white, except for bright spots of red on the ivory tux shirt, the lavender and cobalt bruising around the wide eyes. “I loved you, man!” Inexplicably, Sonny started for the wall where the electrical array was exposed.

Vinnie knew instantly what would happen. Even as he fought the knowledge – *Sonny couldn't do this, Sonny wouldn't!* -- his mind thought: *It's too late. Just accept.* But his body operated on another level and was suddenly right next to Sonny, as if no time had passed, as if nothing around him had moved, and he tackled him hard just inches from the deadly apparatus. They both went down with a thud, Vinnie on top.

Stunned for a moment, Sonny went limp. Then he moved his head and their rough, unshaven jaws brushed. “Why?” Sonny asked tiredly, just above a whisper.

He didn't answer. But he had an answer. An answer to Sonny's last words. That answer was: he loved him back. Desperately. Even if death was what Sonny wanted, Sonny's last decision, he couldn't stand there and watch him die.

First he could hear only their labored breathing. The lingering aroma of the wine they'd drunk together scented the air with their gasps. He felt the heat like a nova between them. Then a sudden, breathless, violent desire. Sonny's agonized look changed to one of abject grief. He breathed one word. Only Vinnie was close enough to hear it. “Go.” Then his face closed to stone.

Slowly, the world came back into being and Frank was yanking on his arm.

Vinnie did not want to move, because as soon as he did so this man...this man he loved... would be out from under his protection forever. That it bothered him so much, when he had worked so hard to destroy him – no, he had worked hard to destroy Dave; Sonny was a by-product -- made Vinnie angry and sad. Incredibly sad.

Finally he rolled off Sonny who lay limp and stunned, and allowed Frank to handcuff him. He heard a scuff of shoe against hard flooring, then the handcuffs being snapped in place on Sonny, who seemed compliant enough although Vinnie didn't look to see. His heart

hammered. He found he could not look at the man anymore. He looked anywhere and everywhere but at him. He thought if he met those mischievous brown eyes ever again, blackened now by his own punches, he would just fucking go ahead and lose it all the way and, well, even the padded rooms at the psych wards wouldn't be enough to hold him in then.

I got the fever, you got the cure.

Frank was talking to him but he did not hear one word. Everything was gray and blurred. Sounds were distant. Light was dim.

He wondered briefly why Frank was bothering with the handcuffs at all. His cover was blown. Sonny knew. What would the OCB do, stash Sonny Steelgrave off on some island forever while Vinnie continued to play cop? That was ridiculous. It was over.

But Frank still took him to jail, held him for an hour, then let him go. Vinnie had some vague memory of Frank talking to him in a closed room, and of himself being very uncooperative. Frank offered him a cigarette and for the first time in a longer time than Vinnie could recall, he pushed it away. It was like everything was happening in a fog. He didn't want anything, even that small token of comfort.

Someone came in to look at his face, bringing out the antiseptic and tape. He pushed him away, refused the light in his eyes, refused the Tylenol.

He remembered Frank saying, "What happened in there?" And Vinnie had shaken his head and said, "Nothing. Nothing." Frank had said, "We'll get him for assault, too." And Vinnie had said, "Nothing happened. There was no assault. I fell off the stage in the dark." And Frank had said, sarcastically, "He fall, too?" Vinnie answered, "As a matter of fact...."

Finally Frank had relented. "Go home, Vince. It's over. We'll deal with the details later."

Afterward, Vinnie left alone, taking a cab home to the dingy apartment he had kept outside of Atlantic City "just in case," changed out of his bloody clothes and slept for about 18 hours straight.

When he woke, everything was different. The whole world was loud. When he went out the people were all suspicious, nasty, spiteful-seeming little parasites. He stayed away from his family. He tried to stay away from everyone. But after two days Frank called demanding a meeting. He still insisted, for the time being, on protecting Vinnie's cover, but Vinnie said, "No. I'll meet you in your office."

"You calling the shots now?" Frank asked.

"You can't keep me under now, and you know it."

Frank finally agreed for 9 A.M.

Vinnie arrived early. He asked to wait in Frank's office. Because he was a hero, they let him in the locked office even though no one was supposed to be in there alone around all the sensitive information of on-going undercover cases. He started with the desk and moved on to the file cabinets. It took him only ten minutes. When he found the information he wanted, and the location of the item, he quickly memorized all the data. Then Frank arrived and things deteriorated from there.

Frank talked a lot about stuff Vinnie pretended to listen to, nodding. But he did not hear it. He told Vinnie that, yes, his cover was indeed blown. So Vinnie would be testifying at the indictment hearing in approximately one month. As a Federal agent. He would never again be able to work undercover for the OCB. His job status would change. To what, Vinnie didn't really care.

Sonny was up for the murder of Patrice. He was about to make parole, so Vinnie needed to stay low. While none of the other guys at the party, except Sid, would ever talk in court, they had the video tape. That, and Vinnie, would be what cinched the whole case.

I saw you garrote a man in my face.

Vinnie felt hot and then cold. He tried to say, "I don't want to testify," but it never came out through his thick throat. Frank would yell at him anyway if he said it.

After about 45 minutes of hearing Frank's voice through a fog, Vinnie suddenly said, "Can I see him?"

Frank frowned. "Who?"

"Sonny."

"Are you serious? Try to remember. I've been telling you. You two are forbidden to have any contact. No letters, no visits, no phone calls, nothing. Plus, it's too dangerous. Why would you want to?"

Vinnie ignored the question. He said, "Oh. Yeah. Ok." He swallowed hard, then said, absently, "Why?"

"Earth to Vinnie. It's too dangerous! You're the star witness!"

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The courthouse was a looming cavern of a castle. It looked ominous. Vinnie did not want to be there. He felt like some kind of sad vampire entering a church and starting to burn. It wasn't the mob oath or programming or being "made" that affected him. None of that mattered to him. He'd never cared about all that, never even been tempted to truly "turn." No. It was Sonny. Just Sonny. Only Sonny.

This is about the need in your life not to run rampant over other people's lives simply because your light burns brighter.

He did not want to do this.

It seemed like forever and it seemed like no time had passed before they called him, their final Grand Jury witness. The press was there from every television station, every newspaper, every magazine. A sea of cameras, microphones, nervous sweat and cheap suits. He ignored them all as they parted to allow him to pass. The bailiff opened the big wooden doors to the courtroom, nodding him in.

He was dressed impeccably in one of the pinstripe Armani suits Sonny had bought him. It fit him perfectly. For some reason, it had been stashed at his apartment. It felt good to wear it, and the diamond cufflinks, and the tiny gold tie tack, even though he knew it was all wrong. He'd lost the Rolex, and the ring, but he didn't care. He walked in with his head up, staring straight ahead, eyes only on the stand. He swore on the Bible he no longer believed in, then he sat.

He knew there had been a lot of ruckus going on. Things were not going smoothly in that court. There were pissed off lawyers and a pissed off judge, and the Grand Jury was restless. Frank was pissed but Vinnie had hardly spoken to him. He wasn't supposed to talk about the case anymore ever since he'd been subpoenaed weeks before. He knew Sid had been raked over the coals by Sonny's attorney. He wished he could've seen it.

He looked at the prosecution. He looked at the judge. He looked at the flag and the wall and the back door and the corridor door. He looked everywhere and anywhere but at Sonny. If they made him look, if they made him identify him, he didn't know if he'd be able to do it.

You know, it never occurred to me we'd be friends.

His heart was in his throat. The courtroom was utterly silent. The prosecutor stood. Asked his name. Rank. Stupid questions. Autopilot questions. Then it began. Did he infiltrate the Steelgrave organization? Did he work there for about a year? Did he witness illegal activities? And more stupid questions establishing context. He heard himself maintain simplicity, offering nothing more. "Yes." "Yes." "Yes." "Yes." "No."

Once the prosecutor asked him to speak up. He did not realize he'd been speaking so softly.

He asked if Vinnie had access to top levels. "Yes."

Was it his job to get as close as possible to Mr. Steelgrave in order to do that?

"Yes."

He asked if Vinnie had ever considered turning.

“What?” He blinked, waking up a little.

With all the temptations, all the wealth and power, wouldn't anyone at least consider switching sides? the attorney asked.

“I don't know about anyone,” Vinnie answered.

What about you?

“I never considered.”

The attorney started in on friendship. What does that mean to most people?

The question made no sense. He deflected it. “I don't know.”

And they asked about his job description. Isn't it written that you are to become friends with these guys? Gain their trust? Their loyalty? Isn't that the job?

“Yes.”

So then he asked it; did he consider himself a friend to Mr. Salvatore Steelgrave?

He kept himself blank. “Yes.”

He asked if that was part of doing the job.

“Yes.”

And so that meant it was an act, that they weren't really friends, then, right?

He said, haltingly, “I didn't think that. At first...maybe...” And then realized he might have fallen into a trap right there. Where was this going? What did this have to do with the night Patrice was killed?

The lawyer left that for awhile and asked about the party, as if reading Vinnie's face all too clearly. Were you there the whole time?

“Yes.”

Did you witness any illegal activities?

He was quiet for a moment as he thought long and hard about that asshole Patrice. The OCB had wanted Patrice even more than they had wanted Sonny. Patrice was the great white whale the hunters were always after.

But you went and screwed it all up. You just had to indulge your blood-lust.

The lawyer repeated the question. He felt Sonny's attorney lean forward but did not look. He felt nothing from Sonny's direction.

He must've taken too long to answer. The lawyer asked again. Did you witness any illegal activities at that party?

He thought about that Bible he'd put his hand on. Going to a Hell he was already living in seemed redundant. He leaned back slightly and said, "Not that I recall."

The whole room went quiet as if everyone had stopped breathing. You could actually hear the noise from the outside hall.

Let me get this straight, the prosecutor was saying, fidgeting angrily with some papers on his desk...you are saying you did not see the murder of Patrice, which they got on video tape....

Sonny's lawyer objected. The video tape was not in evidence and could not be used.

The prosecutor's voice got hotter and he argued that the video tape was stolen, but that didn't mean it didn't exist. People had seen it.

But Vinnie knew only one person had actually seen it before it had disappeared. And that was Frank. And Frank couldn't speak about it to the court because it and its contents were not legal evidence.

What do you get outta this, another pin on your lapel?

Vinnie pursed his lips together tightly to keep away the little smile he felt coming on.

This was why the courtroom was in such a state. This was why lawyers were pissed and cops were restless.

The prosecutor, angrier than ever, implored the judge that he was going somewhere with this, that only one person other than Frank McPike himself had had access, and that was Vincent Terranova.

The judge allowed the question. Vinnie said, "I never saw the tape. I only set it up."

That didn't set well. The attorney's face went pink. *Oh well*, Vinnie thought. *Oh well*.

He was asked if he was with Mr. Steelgrave all that night of the party.

"Most of the time."

Most of the time? When wasn't he with him?

“Well, I didn’t follow him to the bathroom.”

The court snickered.

Did he see Patrice at all?

“Early on. I thought he left early.”

More silence.

There were more questions along those lines, but Vinnie just continued with his yeses and noes, mostly looking at the floor between the two attorney’s desks, and at the back wall where the door to the corridor led to the outside world. He wanted to leave so badly that he had to press his hands down hard on his thighs to keep himself from just standing up and running out.

Then they got to the part of the story where the room was messed up, a huge table flipped over. How did that happen?

“It was a party. People were drinking.”

When Mr. Steelgrave ran, why did Vinnie chase him?

Vinnie sighed, looked over at the Grand Jury, then the judge. “He didn’t really run. He left. And I wasn’t done tellin’ him something.”

That was funny to the court, too. But the prosecutor got pissed and wondered if Vinnie hadn’t chased him because he was a cop and he could not let a guy who’d just committed a heinous crime get away.

Vinnie felt his eyes get a little warm. He looked at his lap for a moment, then up. “No, I just wanted to tell him something.”

And when he chased him inside the theatre and got locked in with him, what happened?

”Nothing.”

At that, the prosecutor read a series of eye witness testimonies saying that the two men had come out of the building many hours later with contusions, cuts, bruises, blood on their shirts. How did that happen?

Vinnie looked up at the ceiling, then the flag, then looked at the Bible on the stand. “I fell.”

That must’ve been a pretty good fall, the attorney said.

“Off the stage, in the dark,” Vinnie said nodding.

So, then, how did he explain Mr. Steelgrave’s injuries?

“I don’t explain them.”

But wasn’t it true that Mr. Steelgrave assaulted him?

“No. There was no assault. I fell.”

Then how did Mr. Steelgrave become injured?

“Maybe he fell. I don’t know.”

Maybe you both fell off the stage together?

“Maybe,” Vinnie said sarcastically.

So how would that happen then?

“Well, I was slipping and maybe he reached out to steady me and fell, too. I didn’t see. I blacked out for a minute.”

Sonny’s lawyer objected to the “maybes.” If Mr. Terranova didn’t remember because he’d blacked out, then he didn’t remember. Move on.

So the kitchen area had been found a mess. What happened in there?

“Nothing. It wasn’t very clean when we got there.”

Nothing? There was a broken mop. Broken glassware. Broken wine cabinet. Broken plant.

“We didn’t know how long we’d be stuck there. We were looking for something to eat.” Then he added quietly, “And it was a broom, not a mop.”

What else happened? Did you talk?

Vinnie shrugged. “Some.” He shut his eyes for a moment, remembering that look on Sonny’s face.

How’re you gonna remember this, Vinnie?

How could he forget? And that fucking song. He said, “We played a little music on the juke.” His voice trembled a little.

Surely you talked about him finding out you were a Federal agent. Surely this was a big area of contention.

Vinnie shrugged again. "He'd suspected before."

There was a gasp in the courtroom.

The prosecutor looked completely shocked. Are you saying he already knew you were a Federal agent? For how long?

"I didn't say he knew. I said he suspected."

For how long?

"A few months back maybe."

Well, that was completely unbelievable to the prosecutor, who then called Vinnie untruthful, not forthcoming, and could he maybe have this witness labeled as "hostile."

The judge did not rule right away but asked the prosecutor to continue.

So they went down that road. Had Mr. Steelgrave ever accused him of being a cop?

"Yes."

What had been his reply?

"I told him I wasn't."

And he just believed you?

"I don't know," Vinnie said. "You'd have to ask him."

Why else would he let you stay? Why else were you still working for the man?

"I don't know."

So, let me get this straight, the attorney said. You just told him you weren't a Federal agent and he just seemed to believe you and let it go?

Vinnie felt the heat behind his eyes rise a little more when he said, trying not to sound sad or dejected or lost or anything but professional, "He always believed everything I said."

So you'd earned his complete trust?

Now Vinnie couldn't look anywhere but at the floor leading to the corridor door. "Yes."

And you're trying to convince us he wasn't angry when he finally learned the truth?

"I'm not trying to convince anyone of anything."

So he asked the question again.

"I told you, he suspected me before that."

I asked if he was angry.

Vinnie, drop dead...

"I guess."

Which is why he assaulted you in the theatre?

"I told you I fell. There was no assault."

Vinnie sighed as they went into the details of finding the rings and the watches on the floor. He couldn't recall at the moment why they'd be there. Then suddenly he remembered. That was where he'd lost the Rolex and the ring. Frank had never even mentioned them. He said, "If we'd wanted to hurt each other, we'd have kept them on."

So you admit to taking them off to avoid hurting each other? Is that not a prelude to a fight?

"We were doing a lot of climbing around, looking for a way out. We must've taken them off at some point to make it easier."

There was a pause. Silence. The attorney shuffled through some papers, then approached the stand.

Now they asked the real question. Did you, Mr. Terranova, remove evidence of a video tape from the police evidence rooms?

"No. I never saw the tape."

You deny playing any part in the theft of that evidence?

"Yes."

Have you had any contact with Mr. Steelgrave since his arrest?

"No. I'm not allowed."

One more question: Do you still consider yourself a loyal friend to the defendant, Mr. Steelgrave, and in that misplaced loyalty have you said anything here to undermine the case against him?

It was really two questions and Vinnie was not stupid. He could follow the track and where it led. The truth. And a lie. "Yes to the first. No to the second."

My pal, you are a major league liar...

He was shocked at how nonchalant he could be.

Then the prosecutor simply gave up.

Sonny's attorney pushed back his chair noisily and approached. He asked only a few pointed questions.

Could Vinnie give a time as to when he thought Paul Patrice might've left the party?

"No."

Did Vinnie know where Paul Patrice was?

"No."

Did Vinnie assault Mr. Steelgrave in the theatre?

"Not that I recall."

Did Mr. Steelgrave assault Vinnie in the theatre?

"No. I fell."

Had they been in contact since the arrest?

"No."

Would he please tell the court again that it was true that they were together the whole night of the bachelor party?

"It's true. We were together the whole night."

Would he please identify that the man sitting next to him is the man he was with all that night, his client, Mr. Salvatore Steelgrave?

Vinnie did not want to look at him. He thought, *They can't make me look at him.* But his eyes did not obey. They shifted easily and lightly until his gaze landed on that enigma of a man.

Sonny wore a silk black suit, a very pale pink shirt, and a tie that looked black but caught the colors of the lights in the room and reflected them back in hues of blues and lavenders. His skin was golden. His hair was very dark, very slick today.

He was staring at Vinnie not with an expression of smugness that Vinnie expected, but actual, naked, outright shock. It was as if he didn't even care if the court saw. *You're too vulnerable*, Vinnie thought. *You always were too vulnerable for this game.*

Sonny's dark eyes flashed with a thin sheen of moisture.

Vinnie's own eyes grew unbearably hot. Suddenly he felt like he couldn't breathe.

There's a lot about who you are I feel close to...

He looked away quickly. "Yes, that's the man."

He did not wonder what he had just done. He didn't question it. He just sat there trying to think of nothing, nothing. But one thought kept turning over and over. *Please just let me go. Please just let me go.*

Sonny's attorney turned to Sonny. Vinnie could see peripherally that Sonny shook his head hard. The attorney said, "No more questions, your Honor."

The prosecutor jumped up for a redirect.

Vinnie swallowed hard.

He asked Vinnie, right out of the blue, what his definition of friendship might be?

Vinnie turned to look at the judge hoping he'd not allow it. The judge did nothing.

"Loyalty."

Anything else?

"Love."

Anything else?

Vinnie thought of Sonny's word this time, and said with a glare, "Honor."

And with all those definitions, which you yourself have just mentioned, you'd do just about anything for that friend, now wouldn't you, including stealing evidence, lying on a witness stand....

Sonny's attorney jumped up, protested, objected, objected again. Vinnie sat back and watched but he was getting tired now, and things were starting to fog again the way they had back at the theatre when Frank was arresting him and talking to him and he heard nothing. Maybe they all really did think he had done it, stolen the tape, burned it, possibly buried the ashes. Maybe they all really knew how lost he had felt afterward, that he had sleepwalked through the entire past month wondering when the thin strand of a thread inside him that was all that held him together would snap clean once and for all, and he would fall and never be able to get back up again.

Now the attorney was asking him a question again. Vinnie felt light-headed and asked for water. He could feel his body grow heavy, hot, then clammy.

"Could you please repeat the question?"

A friend might take a bullet for another friend. A friend might steal a video tape for another friend. Right?

Vinnie nodded. "Perhaps."

He caught himself glancing very quickly at Sonny again, whose brows were narrowed now. Sonny elbowed his attorney fiercely and the lawyer jumped up and objected. Leading the witness. In the meantime, their eyes locked, his and Sonny's, and the courtroom disappeared for a moment. Vinnie blinked. Felt his heart rate double. He had the strangest idea that he wanted to climb over the tables, push everything out of the way and go to him. Incredibly, Sonny put his hand on the table and made their secret hand signal for "no."

Casually, Vinnie lifted his hand an inch from his podium and splayed his fingers, a subtle right-hand gesture for, "It's ok."

He heard the prosecutor say, "They're in on it together!"

The judge said, "Do you have any more evidence, sir?"

"No."

"Then are we finished?"

"No!"

He turned on Vinnie. He asked, did you or did you not steal the video tape, as anyone might to help a friend?

Vinnie said, very calmly, still staring at Sonny, "I might do that for a friend, sir, yes. In fact, I would. But when I got there it was already gone."

Sonny smiled then, and there was that smug look, the twisted lips, that God-help-him-shimmer in those mischievous dark eyes, those eyes that should have been his enemy every which way to Heaven. But instead it was a look that stopped his heart. And he didn't know why. He only knew that without it he was incomplete.

I got the fever, you got the cure.

.....

Vinnie did not want to hang out afterward. He did not want to see Frank's disappointed, angry face, and managed to avoid him without being seen. Frank would think the mob had gotten to him, or that Sonny had threatened him. He did not want to see any OCB guys. They'd all want to flail him anyway, thinking he was chicken. He didn't care if he was in trouble. After everything he had been through, a little job trouble, even an indictment for lying in a court of law, was an easy thing to handle. He'd done 18 months for the job. He could do another 18 if anyone wanted him to. But right now he didn't want to deal with any of it.

Still, he wanted to stay to learn what was happening. He wanted the updates.

He managed to avoid all his co-workers and hide for awhile in the bathroom. Then he hung out in another wing behind a thin wall where there was a bench. On the other side of the wall were the lesser reporters, and Vinnie managed to stay out of sight and avoid any interviews while still able to hear their updates. And it wasn't but minutes later when the court adjourned and the Grand Jury went to deliberate. They came back within an hour.

Vinnie held his breath as the reporters listened.

Then he heard it. "No indictment. Mr. Steelgrave is free of all charges."

He started to shake. The court exploded. Then there were people everywhere. On a closed circuit TV just around the wall where he stood, he watched the distant hall fill with people from the courtroom. Sonny was with his lawyer and they were surrounded by more black and white suits.

Vinnie looked down at his own suit. It was one of six Sonny had bought him. All he had left.

Vinnie turned and moved away from the approaching crowd. He took the stairs instead of the elevator. At street level, avoiding reporters and cop cars and limos and television trucks, he crossed the cool, November street and headed for a nearby bus stop. Head down, hands in his pockets, he just walked. Downtown was busy. He could disappear here for awhile, he thought. Hide.

When the limo pulled up alongside him, he thought, *How'd he find me so fast?*

“Get in,” said the familiar voice. “Half the mob’s still after you. And probably the OCB now, too.”

His heart slammed his chest, but Vinnie did not even look up. “No, thanks.” He kept walking. He needed the cool air.

He heard a car door bang, heard the designer leather shoes hit the sidewalk.

Sonny grabbed his arm, trying to halt him. A car honked, probably because the limo was blocking traffic. “Don’t be stupid, Vinnie! How come you’re not under protection? The Federal witness program? Whatever...”

“I *am* in hiding. But you found me.”

“Vinnie, you’re not thinking right. Get in the car!”

Still turned away, Vinnie shook his head.

“Christ! C’mon!”

“I can’t look at you right now!”

“I know that, okay?” The tone held a tremor of desolation.

Vinnie took a deep breath, put a hand to his throbbing head. “I need to go somewhere quiet. Everything’s too loud.”

“We can do that,” Sonny said, coaxing. “But we gotta get away from here. It’s not safe.”

Vinnie finally glanced at the limo, but not at Sonny. “Who else is in there?”

“My attorney has his own car. I kicked him out. It’s just me.”

“I just want to disappear.”

“All right,” Sonny said.

Vinnie snorted. “And I don’t mean mob-style.”

“Really?” Sonny retorted. “Because you’re not acting like it, walking down the middle of the cold street at dusk in a twenty-five hundred dollar suit.” He went to the limo and opened the door.

As if on auto-pilot, Vinnie approached, still not looking up. Sonny was alone. Sonny didn’t want to harm him. He knew that without a doubt, especially after what had happened in court. Sonny just wanted to talk. But Vinnie didn’t. He just didn’t.

Still, he followed. What did he expect after what he'd done? That Sonny would leave it alone? That Sonny wouldn't find him? Wouldn't want some answers?

They got into the limo and sat facing each other. It was warm and the leather smelled wonderful, mixed with the recent aromas of the expensive aftershaves of other men, Sonny's entourage which always accompanied him to the courthouse.

Vinnie leaned his head back, closed his eyes. He still felt hot and wondered if he was coming down with something.

I was feeling so bad, asked my family doctor just what I had...

Sonny barked a quick command to the driver through the intercom. Wherever they went, Vinnie didn't care, as long as it was quiet.

And then there was silence.

Vinnie figured Sonny was gloating, maybe just too happy to speak. But when he opened his eyes to look at him Sonny was staring at him with a strange look of dismay and disbelief. And there was a terrifying look of self-loathing that he'd never seen in him before. When their eyes met, Sonny's eyes suddenly became very full. He shook his head hard and said, "No one's ever done anything like that for me. Ever." That last word sounded like 'eva.' He added, seconds later, "At least not without being paid a LOT of money, and even then...not like that."

"I didn't do it for you," Vinnie said a little too harshly. Then, colder, "I did it for me. So I could finally sleep at night."

Alarmingly, tears spilled onto Sonny's face. Italians were dramatic, of course. Sonny had always been emotional. And a little too sensitive. *What's wrong with the way I dress?* But still, Vinnie was shocked. He hadn't meant for his words to be that harsh. He didn't want to make things worse. Sonny said gruffly, "I know. I know you despise me."

He spoke low, his Brooklyn accent warming. "Don't. You're wrong. You're smarter than that, Sonny." He reached out very briefly and touched him on the knee, fingers moving back and forth. He wanted to do more, but didn't.

Sonny shook his head. He lifted his hand and swiped the back of it across his face. Then he started to laugh. "You fucking fell off the stage?" he asked.

Vinnie could not suppress a little smile of his own.

Sonny stopped laughing, then sighed, spreading his hands out from his lap. "What is this?"

"What?"

“What’s going on?” he asked urgently, one hand coming up and indicating the two of them. “Us?”

When Vinnie didn’t answer, Sonny put his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. “I fucking missed you.”

“You missed me? Sonny, you fucking tried to kill yourself. That’s forever!” Until now, he hadn’t really realized how angry he was about that.

Sonny frowned again and his eyes glimmered. “You don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

“Don’t make me say it again. Figure it out!”

“What? Are you blaming me?”

“Blaming you? Fuck!”

“What then?”

“Okay, you listen and listen hard. What is a person supposed to do if the person they...they love most despises them? How the fuck am I supposed to live with that?”

Vinnie felt his eyes shift. He felt hot again. Trapped. How many times had Sonny told him? How many ways? And what did Vinnie do? He stayed under. He kept up the deceit. The betrayal. Sonny was one of the most passionate people Vinnie had ever known. Sonny was the open one, the honest one here. He wore his feelings for Vinnie on his sleeve now. Yet Vinnie had always stayed half-hidden. Always guilty. Even now, it was a habit to hold back from the man. Who despised who? “You’re wrong; it’s you who should despise me, Sonny. You twist it up, you got it all backwards. After everything I’ve done to you. I betrayed you! How can you say you love me? You fucking hate me!”

Sonny’s leg swung forward and kicked him hard in the shin. Then, echoing what Vinnie had said to him in the theatre weeks ago, he said, “Who’s the stupid bastard now?” He reached forward and punched him hard on the shoulder.

Vinnie took the pain gratefully. It was something to focus on.

“Dammit, Vincent! When I thought you were a cop months ago and you told me you weren’t, I had no choice but to believe you even then. Because I couldn’t even imagine a world without you in it. You didn’t convince me at all. Your performance was actually rather weak. I fucking convinced myself. And I believed you. Because I didn’t want to do any of it anymore without you there.”

“But you were ready to kill me then.”

“Fuck no. I did it for show. I woulda let you go even if it came to the point of taking you to the middle of nowhere. I woulda told the guys to stay in the car. I had it all planned. I woulda taken you off in the dark, shot the bullet into the air and told you to run. I couldn't ever kill you. Even if all I knew was that you were out there somewhere, it would be something.”

Vinnie still just sat there stunned.

Sonny said, “And then what you did in court today. No one's ever....” He swallowed hard.

“I don't understand any of this,” Vinnie said softly.

Sonny snorted and rolled his eyes. “That's what I tried to say to myself every single day.” He made his voice into the mimicking drawl of a whiny kid. “What's wrong with you, Sonny. Are ya crazy?” He laughed. “It's a real good way to avoid thinking it through further.”

Vinnie met his eyes again. Looked away. Then looked back.

Just what I'm going through, they can't understand...

Sonny was so open now. His gaze held, never wavering. Sonny looked fantastic in that moment, his eyes, his look, the entire language of his body intent on Vinnie. He was practically glowing.

When Vinnie still wouldn't speak, Sonny twisted his mouth into a scowl and said, “What's there to drink in here? I need a drink.”

Vinnie watched as he pulled out a bottle of champagne and popped the cork. He drank a long time. Finally he stopped. He held the bottle out to Vinnie.

Vinnie took it and drank. It was cold. He tasted nothing, though. After he stopped drinking, he took a deep breath. Sonny grabbed the bottle back, and took another long drink. He was reminded of when they'd shared a bottle in the old Rialto kitchen, the kitchen Sonny had nearly destroyed. He clamped down on that memory, not wanting to think about it.

...can you tell me, what's ailing me...

Sonny smiled suddenly. “You were right in court, it was a broom, not a mop.”

Vinnie clamped down on his grin. Sonny had to have been thinking the very same thoughts as his.

They were quiet for awhile as they shared the bottle.

Then breaking the silence, Sonny said, “Crazy times,” drawing out the word crazy.

“Mmm-hmm,” Vinnie answered.

“That first night I spent in jail, they never let me change outta my clothes ‘til morning. I never slept a wink. I lay there all night bloodsoaked. Every night after, when I got out on bail, I’d go to bed and try to sleep. It was hard because I kept finding myself back at the Rialto lying in the dark covered in blood and thinking of you lying there next to me. I was crazy mad at you, Vinnie. And I still wanted you.”

Vinnie felt his mind start to slow. Even though they’d been very close, close enough for...anything...Sonny had never talked like this before. Not this specific. He felt himself wait because he didn’t know what else to do. He wanted to listen to him, and yet he didn’t. Something in his chest tightened.

Softly, “Are we gonna get our rings and watches back?”

Vinnie said dryly, “Not likely.”

“But it’s my...our property. And I’m not being charged.”

Vinnie sighed. “I wish...” He didn’t finish.

Sonny looked at him. “I know after we were arrested you weren’t ok, either. I felt it. I saw it in your walk. I watched them jerk your arms up and cuff you, shove you into the car, bow your head. I hated the way they treated you, one of their own. If I could’ve, I would’ve broken down walls to get to you, Vinnie.”

“Even though you were crazy mad,” Vinnie said, glancing up shyly.

“Yeah, crazy mad.”

Vinnie swallowed hard.

“I’m so sorry for everything.” Sonny’s voice was strained.

“Sonny....”

“Vinnie....” He straightened himself up. “I never want to see you hurt again. Ever.”

“But I betrayed you!”

“Not in court.”

Vinnie felt his throat tighten.

“You did manage to shock me good, Vinnie.”

Vinnie shut his eyes, bowed his head.

“Hey, Vinnie, that’s a good thing.”

But even though Sonny’s hand reached out and touched his knee, he would not look up. “It’s a good thing, man,” he repeated.

Finally Vinnie said, “Where’re we going?”

Sonny said, “Do you care?”

Vinnie shook his head.

“Then we’ll go everywhere. Fuck ‘em all!”

Vinnie gave him a wry smile.

“I’m not kidding, Vinnie!” His eyes were strange and twinkling, but he was not smiling.

“Okay.”

“That mean you’re with me?”

I’m a cop. I can’t be with him.

As if reading his mind, Sonny said, “I don’t care anymore what you are. Or what I am. Everything changes now. So I’m asking. Are. You. With. Me?”

Vinnie gulped. Hesitated.

You were gonna be the victim, Sonny!

“I always was.”

Sonny lifted his chin and contemplated him through half-closed eyelids. Then he took another drink and set the bottle aside. He rocked forward, then back. “You don’t mean it, though.”

Almost petulant, “I just said it. I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it.”

Sonny got that pained look again. He said gently, almost whispering, “Then say it. Mean it. Or don’t. But tell me if that’s the case so I can let you go.”

Vinnie shut his eyes hard. He did love him. So much. Didn't Sonny get that? Finally Vinnie got up and moved to sit beside him on the rear leather couch.

Sonny leaned back suddenly, still eyeing him with that look.

Vinnie's stomach flipped over. *Ok*, he thought, *so I move closer and he moves back*. Why was this so hard? He reached out and grabbed the other man's hand.

Sonny looked down and grasped back, tight. On impulse, Vinnie lifted their clasped hands to his face and placed a kiss on the back of Sonny's hand near his ring. A new ring. One he'd never seen before.

His lips encountered smooth, taut flesh. Something tugged hard in his chest and his whole body warmed.

Sonny closed his eyes. "Don't do that," he whispered.

Vinnie looked up. Sonny's hand grasped his tighter. He could feel a slight tremble.

Sonny's eyes stayed closed as he said, "If you're gonna kiss me, do it proper."

Vinnie didn't move. He looked at Sonny as the glistening brown eyes slowly opened. Then he let go of Sonny's hand and lifted both his hands to that glowing face, cupped it in his palms. Sonny gasped when Vinnie put his mouth to his. Sonny's arms went around him, drawing him close. Vinnie slid his hands back along Sonny's head, his fingers combing through Sonny's dark, straight hair. The kiss deepened perfectly, sweeter than he could ever have imagined. It was unbelievable how quickly his body responded. His head swam. He didn't want to stop. Finally he pulled back.

"Was that what you wanted?" Vinnie asked breathlessly, hands still pressing Sonny's head.

Sonny's fists gripped the back of Vinnie's suit jacket and tightened his hug. "I've been waiting for that forever."

(End)