

I KNOW YOU REALLY LOVE ME

by Natasha Solten

*“I know you really love me
But you see my hands were tied
I know it must have hurt you
It must have hurt your pride”*

-- Leonard Cohen, Waiting For the Miracle

Sonny woke and everything was a blur. He had no idea where he was, or who was holding onto him so tight – a little too tight – that he couldn’t breathe. Then he realized it was Vinnie and his chest heaved and there were other reasons he couldn’t breathe. There was the pain throughout his entire body, and he felt bloody and wet and soiled and terrible. This had to be Hell, right?

But he couldn’t remember except for flashes of things...him and Vinnie fighting so hard, so mad, and he was all fucked up with loving and hating that guy at the same time because – and he remembered this part quite well – Vinnie was a fucking cop.

But now he lay unmoving, unable to even budge, and he could smell Vinnie like faint spices and chocolate mixed with wine and blood and sweat, and he wanted to throw up because he also smelled the sour scent of his own devastation, his own catastrophe...what had he done? Had he fainted? Had he had a seizure? He couldn’t remember. There was only the last memory of the sound of the pounding on the locked theatre door and he wanted to take them all on, take on the world until he collapsed – well, maybe he had actually done that.

Vinnie wouldn’t let go of him and he couldn’t speak to tell him to stop hugging him in front of all these guys, all these fucking cops. And Vinnie was yelling at someone, but it wasn’t him, even though he wished that Vinnie might’ve yelled at him, then he would’ve known, at least, that there was more to fight, and maybe more fight left in him.

He blinked and his eyes felt very hot and very dry and they ached as if someone had stuck needles in them. ‘Vinnie, let go,’ he thought. ‘Let go.’ He was surprised that his thoughts weren’t that angry but more tender, and it bothered him a lot. ‘Let go.’ He tried to move again, but no deal.

He watched everything as if from a far distant vantage. Someone dragged Vinnie up. No, it was two someones. And Vinnie yelled a lot more, struggling, but Sonny couldn’t make out the words. And now there were other people around Sonny, doing stuff to him that he couldn’t understand, and putting him on a folding gurney. Sonny saw Vinnie literally dragged through the bright doorway of the theatre, fighting, then going limp. Well, he deserved it, Sonny thought. He deserved to suffer because that’s what happens to

traitors, to people who betray the very ones they are supposed to love. Yeah, Vinnie deserved a lot of suffering for who he was. Sonny couldn't justify it any other way, not after everything, no, not after....

Sonny wouldn't let himself think about it, allowing that beautiful man into his life, into his penthouse, into his bed. Vinnie, who was just about the toughest and most gentle guy Sonny had ever met, the smartest, the strongest, the kindest, the best friend he'd always longed for.... But Vinnie had a flaw that Sonny had missed. Vinnie did not know about loyalty. Oh no. For all his smarts, his education, his shrewd assessments of the world around him, he had somehow skipped that word in his vast repertoire. Loyalty and honor. What did that mean to a guy like Vinnie? After everything Sonny had given and given?

No, Vinnie deserved pain for what he'd done.

The gurney was moving and Sonny was blinded by the late afternoon sun, bright and gold and cold.

Then he was in the ambulance and he heard more of a ruckus not too far away. The pins and needles were fading a little and he found he could move slightly. He lifted his head painfully and saw, out the still-open back door of the ambulance, Vinnie banging something against the old Rialto's side wall, and heard more yelling, saw some guy trying to grab Vinnie, stop him. Vinnie was yelling, then sobbing, falling to his knees, and pieces of something dull and black scattered around him, and something shiny like a snake riffled in the breeze.

Sonny turned to the ambulance attendant and said, surprised he had a voice now, "Can you do me a favor? Can you punch me real hard and knock me out?"

The ambulance driver gave him a confused look. Needless to say, he did not obey, and Sonny had to hear those sobs as the door was closed and the ambulance drove off with him in it.

'Yeah,' he thought. 'Take me away from here. Far away.' But he knew far away, or farther, would never be far enough.

* * *

After a week, Sonny got out of the hospital. Most of the time he'd spent in there he'd been asleep or unconscious or whatever. He didn't care. For one hour he saw a shrink who asked him about the suicide attempt. All Sonny could say, over and over, was, "What suicide attempt?" He didn't remember any of that. How he'd gotten hurt. And he didn't want to believe it. He told the shrink he'd been drinking, as if maybe that would placate him. He wondered aloud if it could've been an accident...if maybe he'd fallen into the exposed electrical apparatus. He did remember Vinnie warning him not to touch it earlier in the day. But the shrink said no, it wasn't an accident. And Sonny said, "Well, fuck then, I don't know." The shrink offered to prescribe something for depression and Sonny replied, "What, you got a pill in there'll keep me outta prison?"

Well, anyway, he was out now. And he'd been taken directly to the nearest precinct police station in the Bronx.

He moved automatically, trying not to think, to feel. Everything passed before him slow and strange, as if he were dreaming. Any time his thoughts descended into this hell he now found himself in, he distracted himself with times tables, or “Mary Had A Little Lamb” or “99 Bottles of Beer.” He was a walking dead man if he was going to be prosecuted here in New York.

Sonny sat for a long time in a cold cement room saying nothing to the strangers who walked in and out, who conferred behind one-way glass mirrors, who offered him nothing but a tepid glass of water about two hours into the ordeal. He was always thirsty now. The doctors told him it was a side effect. People who had been electrocuted or struck by lightning, and who had miraculously survived intact, often felt dry mouthed and thirsty for years afterward, sometimes for the rest of their lives.

He had put a call in to his lawyer. They allowed that. And that was who he was waiting for now.

He sat with his hands on the table, folded, and hummed softly to himself. “Doctor, Doctor, give me the news...” he sang softly. But the images that one brought up came to the forefront of his mind, ugly, brutal, full color facial bruises and dried blood on white Armani tuxedo shirts, and he winced and clamped down on any thoughts. He still had the remains of a smarting black eye.

He shut his eyes tight until he saw only white snow. The back of his mind was a festering sore, populated with images of Vinnie he couldn’t handle anymore – Vinnie in a dark blue silk suit and jet black overcoat with snow falling all around him, Vinnie staring at him with wide blue eyes when Sid had accused him of being a cop, Vinnie leaning helplessly into him after Lorenzo attacked him, Vinnie watching him with a burning feverish look as Sonny pulled back after that first soft kiss...a night he could never get back to, and never wanted to think of again. He allowed himself no further introspection on it all. Instead, he opened his eyes and counted the cracks in the wall, then counted the tiles in the acoustic ceiling....

That was when his lawyer finally came.

Their talk had confused Sonny. He had thought to be brought up on murder charges in NY, but Adams only told him not to worry about that, that what the D.A. had up his sleeve was a deal and Sonny would be a fool not to take it, although he’d probably lose everything in the process.

The deal was a good one, but the loss of his casino smarted. Fuck the territory. Fuck Atlantic City. He didn’t even care about billions of dollars in potential future earnings. What Sonny had really loved was running that hotel, dammit. If they took that, he’d have nothing. Terranova Marine had been shut down while he slept in the hospital. And the rest of his businesses, well, with the fall of the Royal Diamond, they’d all fall, too.

If Sonny took the deal, he would go to prison in New Jersey for tax evasion. The deal was for one year in Newark State Pen with possible time off for good behavior. He might do eight months. That was it.

It was funny, actually. Vinnie would’ve called it ‘ironic.’ Because Sonny paid his taxes on all his businesses, afraid of that very thing, paranoid of being sent up on a loophole that stupid, that insane. And here he was, innocent of this charge, and this was what he’d be doing time for if he took the deal. If he said yes, all the other stuff, the murder of Patrice, the conspiracy charges, everything else would be dropped. But why? Why?

His lawyer did not know all the details. But he said the FBI was quaking. They seemed to have a weak case at best, if that, and the D.A. was nervous and very badly wanted to put this notch in his belt because of an upcoming election, so this was the way of it. Sonny could take the deal and be out and free before the next year was up. They could all wash their hands of him. Sonny would be ruined, but he wouldn't do life...or worse.

So, on Adams' advice, which Sonny trusted, he took the deal. But he still wondered why. Vinnie had been good. Real good. How could the job have been fucked up so badly? Vinnie had goods on Sonny that could get Sonny that dreaded lethal injection. Vinnie had video. Vinnie had his cop's word and the entire OCB and FBI on his side.

But Sonny didn't care. And he never wanted to think about Vincent Terranova again.

After signing a seemingly endless stack of papers, Sonny was given an orange jumpsuit, cuffed, shackled at the ankles, and taken straight to prison, do not pass "Go," do not collect two hundred.

He remembered the images when he got there. Shadows flat and one-dimensional in the courtyard. A soft wind tainted with burning metal. Sky like steel. The inside prison walls bathed in a sickly yellow light that sapped energy. This was where Vinnie had done 18 months just to set his cover. Jesus!

All of it seemed so unreal, a nightmare fantasy he was trying to shake by waking. But he wasn't asleep, and he moved forward into it, gritting his teeth, tasting tart anger. He wasn't afraid. He was known. He was Sonny Steelgrave. Mob-guys were untouchables in prison. Everyone knew that. If you got messed up with them, you lost your life very quick, and not in a pretty way. He knew he'd be mostly ignored, feared, even. So, no, he was not afraid. But he was pissed all right. Because what he hated the most was the smell. He hated the combination of floor soap and dirty toilets. Hated the sourness of the men who leered from inescapable lockdown, the bleach of the laundry, the over-chlorinated water of the showers, the chemical canned smell of refried beans served every day. Hated that nothing of the outside world lived here, nothing, not even the thinnest scent of fresh rain, or real orange juice, not even a faint whiff of the heady, one of a kind sweetness of Vinnie when they had moved together like one person in Sonny's soft, satin bed.

He narrowed his eyes, started counting the lights in the main room, then the guards, then the prison cells themselves even though they were already numbered.

He ignored the personal searches, disassociated from them completely, then dressed in the clothing they supplied him with, took the requisite items assigned him and wordlessly allowed himself to be led to his cell. For some reason, he did not have a cell-mate, which further confused him because no one in the pen, save those on Death Row, or in solitary, bunked alone. But he didn't question anything. Or anyone. He sat on his bunk for a long time, head in his hands, until the call for dinner came and they were all shuffled single-file to the disgusting white dining room to partake of an evening meal of lumpy cornbread, chemical-tasting beans, and something that resembled meat but could never have been any kind of animal Sonny had ever heard of.

Sonny wasn't hungry anyway, and could barely manifest the energy to care or not care. Indifference was easier. And much more energy efficient. And it was a good coping mechanism. When all else failed,

when there was nothing left to do and everything had been taken from you, tell yourself that nothing matters. It worked. It worked real well.

* * *

Vinnie stood outside the gate for five minutes before it opened. When he entered he was taken to a building away from the prison blocks, and led to a nice office where an amiable 35 year old man with a thick head of dark gold hair met him. Mick was the last person in the world you'd ever think would make a good warden. He looked like a cross between an angel and an accountant. He wore a soft blue shirt and black trousers. No tie. He showed no toughness at all. He smiled at Vinnie. "You sure have been missed around here," he greeted.

Vinnie nodded but did not smile. He reached into the pocket of his black blazer and took out his I.D. He flashed it.

Mick said, "What? You need to show me you're here on official business or something?"

"Or something," Vinnie muttered.

"What's up, Vince?"

Vinnie swallowed hard, meeting the other man's dark green eyes. "You have a new guy."

"We have a lot of new guys."

"Steelgrave."

Mick's brow rose. "I'm aware of him. He's en route today. I just got the call not two hours ago, and just received his file. He's not here yet. He's been sent up on a white collar. Why they didn't send him to the resort, I don't know, but I guess they figure he's dangerous enough, despicable rep...ran the mob in AC. Possibly suicidal, too, but refuses medication."

Vinnie said, "I...I'm somewhat..." He cleared his throat. "I'm responsible for him."

Mick tilted his head. "You worked with that guy? I didn't know. But tax evasion...that's all your guys got? I'm confused. Why would the OCB even bother?"

"It's a long story," Vinnie muttered.

Mick sighed. "Okay, so what?"

"I want to make sure he's okay."

"Yeah? Why?"

"I ask this as a favor," Vinnie said, not answering the question.

“He’s mob, right? Hell, Vince, he’s already protected by rep alone. And the suicide attempt...believe me, he’ll be watched.”

Vinnie blinked, keeping his face neutral. He said, “If I hear about anything, and I mean anything happening to him in here, I will be on you so fast....”

“Hey, you don’t have to threaten me. Vince! Hey!”

“I want him protected. The way I was.”

“Why?”

Vinnie was silent.

Mick stared at him for long seconds. Then he said, “Okay, I’ll do what I can. No cell mate. Light duty.”

Vinnie said quietly, “Thanks. I owe you.” He got up.

“Hey, not so fast. What’s the story here?”

“No story.” Vinnie shrugged, not taking his seat again, glancing nervously at the door.

“Should I be worried about the part of his file that says he might be suicidal?”

Vinnie blinked, chewing his lower lip. “I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so? Tell me.”

“He was cornered. He saw no other way out. Now, well, he’s only here for a year. That’s not life...or worse.”

“So he thought he would die anyway? Is that what you’re saying?”

Vinnie nodded.

“And now that he isn’t going to die he won’t try to off himself again?”

Vinnie looked away and sighed. “Yeah, that’s what I think.”

“So you gonna be coming back here a lot? Following up?”

Vinnie took a long breath. “Every Friday, if you allow it.”

Mick nodded. “I don’t get it, though.”

“You don’t have to.”

Mick sighed again. “Okay, I’ll make sure he gets the visitation. The rule is every other week, but I can make an exception for you for every week since Steelgrave’s in for a non-violent offense. How long you want?”

“How long do I get?”

“Families can spend up to five hours. They sometimes sign up for the trailers for all afternoon. Noon to five.”

“The conjugal trailers?” Vinnie asked.

Mick’s brows closed together in a frown. “Yeah. They’re only for the non-violent prisoners. Families put in for them, too. Then they can watch TV together, play games, whatever, without other guards and prisoners breathing down their necks.”

Vinnie nodded.

“What is this guy to you?” Mick asked softly.

“We became....” Vinnie’s breath caught. “We were friends.”

“Okay. If he’ll see you, then there’s no problem. But don’t those mob guys usually take a major disliking to cops?”

Vinnie closed his eyes. They had become suddenly hot. Finally, he opened them. Mick was staring at him without judgment, without suspicion. There was only acceptance. Vinnie said again, “Yeah. But I think he’ll see me.”

“It’s done, then.”

“Thanks.”

Now Mick smiled. “No big deal. We miss you here.”

Vinnie gave him a small smile in return. Then headed for the door.

“Vince,” Mick said. “Take care of yourself.”

“You, too.” And he was out the door.

* * *

Sonny looked up as the door to his cell opened. He'd had the morning off. Maybe now it was time to go to work. He didn't know why he only worked half-days, and only four days a week, but he didn't question it. They gave him light duty in the kitchens. Sometimes he did dishes. Most of the time he stood around waiting for something to do because most of the daily work was already done by noon, including the dinner prep.

The guard motioned him to get up. "C'mon."

Sonny obeyed, putting down his book. He was reading "Tom Sawyer," a book from the library. The edition looked about as old as he was.

The guard moved aside as Sonny exited. Then Sonny said, "Wait. My apron." They were only assigned one and admonished never to lose it.

"You don't need it," the guard said.

Sonny frowned. "Okay."

The guard pushed him ahead of him. Sonny turned. "Where are we going?"

"Face ahead!"

Sonny obeyed.

Then the guard said, quieter, "You have a visitor."

Sonny froze in mid-step. He didn't turn again. He didn't need to incite this one. But he said, very coldly, "I don't want to see anyone."

"Those are my orders. Let's go."

Sonny said again, "I don't want to see anyone."

"Are you refusing to go?"

"Yes."

"But you don't even know who it is."

Sonny blinked, feeling panic rise in his stomach. He had an idea of who it might be, but what if it was Adams? What if there was business to attend to, what with the casino being closed, the hotel put on the market?

"So who is it?" Sonny asked blandly.

"How am I supposed to know? They didn't give a name."

Sonny gulped. “Okay, but stick around. I’ll need an escort back if I don’t want to stay.”

He heard the guard puff out a breath in exasperation. “Just get going,” he ordered.

Sonny moved, but slowly, as if his legs were encumbered by water in a pool.

They arrived at the visitor’s lounge. It was light and airy, not like the rest of the prison. It resembled an airport lounge somewhat. Sonny noticed lots of windows, and tables with games and puzzles on them. Kids were around, which seemed completely incongruous, unnerving.

Sonny stood in the doorway, surveying the room. When he saw him, he couldn’t breathe. The guard stood behind him. Sonny wanted to turn right then, turn away, go back into the sickly dampness of the cell block, the yellow energy-sapping light, the awful smells...anything but this.

Instead, without volition, his legs propelled him forward. He couldn’t look away. ‘Okay,’ he thought. ‘Okay, then.’ The pull was too strong. Magnetic. But Sonny vowed it wouldn’t be that simple, thinking, ‘He knows I can’t turn him away. But I won’t make it easy. It won’t be easy like that between us ever again.’

Vinnie stood. He looked slimmer than usual, maybe even a little pale. But good. He looked great, in fact. His face had completely healed from their fight, but Sonny remembered Vinnie was not quite as beaten up as he had been. Unless Vinnie let him win, Sonny lost every match they’d ever had, including the match of his life. He wore blue jeans and a long-sleeved white shirt open at the collar. His dark hair was thick, shiny, spilling over in a few long strands onto his forehead. Sonny remembered how soft that hair was. Something tingled inside him. As he sat, he started counting the lights in the room.

Vinnie didn’t say anything, but he sat, too. Sonny didn’t look at him. He counted 29, 30.

Vinnie pushed something toward him. A shiny plastic bag. “Here.”

Sonny looked at the bag. Opened it. Inside were some paperback novels, two large Hershey bars, a bar of the expensive handmade soap Sonny had always liked, a notebook, a nice pen, a Walkman and some tapes, a toothbrush, and a few other things.

“They won’t let me have half of this,” Sonny said abruptly.

Vinnie said, “I already cleared it.”

Sonny glanced at him, annoyed. He didn’t want Vinnie going to any trouble for him. Sonny never wanted to feel like he owed him anything. He closed the bag, pushed it away. “I don’t want it.”

“Then give it away to someone who does want it,” Vinnie said quietly.

Sonny sighed. 'It doesn't matter,' he thought. 'I don't care. I don't care.' He glanced at Vinnie again, who was looking at him like someone had just died. Sonny felt his heart stop, then start again. "What?" he tried to keep his voice neutral.

"I just want to make sure you're okay."

"Compared to what?" Sonny asked.

Vinnie looked down at his hands on the table. When he looked up again, his eyes were swimming. "I got you the best deal I could."

Sonny lifted his head, narrowing his eyes. "Adams told me it was the D.A.'s deal."

"There's a lot you don't know," Vinnie said gruffly, blinking back tears.

Sonny stood then. His chair almost went out from under him. He signaled the guard, who came over. "I'd like to go back now," he said.

Vinnie stood. "Please...."

Sonny looked away.

Vinnie reached out, handing Sonny the bag. Without looking back, Sonny took the bag, then left the room with the guard.

* * *

Sonny sat on his bunk for a long time, the bag sitting untouched beside him. He closed his eyes tightly. Damn Vinnie! He fucked everything up. Sonny had been doing just fine. Then Vinnie had to come visit him. The last thing Sonny wanted to think about was Vinnie.

Finally, he lay down, put his face into his pillow and willed himself to sleep.

* * *

Sonny knew the rule. You got one afternoon of visitation every two weeks. So he could not figure out why the following Friday he was taken, again, to the visitor's lounge. He knew it wasn't Adams this time. Adams, his lawyer, could visit any time.

He followed the guard through the doorway and there was Vinnie.

Sonny went to him, sat down. "Why are you here again?"

Vinnie looked a little hurt at the question. Well, good, Vinnie deserved to hurt!

"Well?" Sonny asked.

Vinnie said, voice level, “I have permission to see you once a week. Every Friday. Get used to it.”

Sonny scowled, turned away and started counting window panes. For a long time neither said anything. Then Sonny said, “I figure you always do what you want. What, when you were here building your cover, were you friends with the warden or something?”

“Yeah.”

Forgetting for a moment that he didn’t want to see Vinnie, or even think about him, Sonny said, “Did you really do 18 full months here?”

“I really did.”

“You’re nuts.”

Vinnie answered him with a small smile. “I guess.”

Sonny just shook his head, clamping down on the unbidden affection he suddenly felt. It was stupid. Foolish. This guy had worked really hard to come take him down. It was as if Vinnie had been groomed, up and down, to be his enemy, to be his Judas. And he was still talking to the guy? Christ! Vinnie had not done anything against his will. He was a willing participant. Even after...after they slept together...made love...were lovers. That had been how Sonny had thought of it, anyway. With women he’d played. He’d played the field. With Vinnie, though, it was different. With Vinnie there was no field. It was just Vinnie and just him. And their hearts beat simultaneously, that drum of heat, of longing, of trust. Everything just right. Their laughter. Their passion. Sonny had given Vinnie everything, even his body. All of himself. His open heart. He had never done that before with anyone.

Something inside Sonny ached sharply, closed up, and he felt slightly green.

Vinnie said something to him very softly, but he didn’t hear it. There was a buzzing in his ears. A loud buzzing. Louder. The room began to spin. Something felt like it was crumpling in his solar plexis. And then he was falling.

He woke and there was a guard standing beside his chair. Vinnie was crouched on one knee beside the chair, his hands on Sonny’s shoulders, holding him up, keeping him upright. “It’s okay,” Vinnie told the guard. “They told me he’s not eating enough. Can we get some water?”

The guard nodded and was gone.

Sonny looked at Vinnie, who still gripped his shoulders. Vinnie was close. Real close. And he smelled so good. Sonny gazed at him, at those wide blue eyes that looked so bleak just now, and said, “I hate you.”

Vinnie nodded. “I know.”

Sonny shook Vinnie’s hands off him. “Just so we got that straightened out,” he added.

Just then, the guard came back with the water. Sonny drank some, always thirsty these days, and felt a little better.

Vinnie walked around the table and took his seat again. Sonny stared at him for a long time. Vinnie was really no good at receiving such stares. Usually he ducked his head, or looked aside. But this time Vinnie didn't flinch. While they watched each other, Sonny did the seven times tables in his head all the way to 12. He wondered what times tables Vinnie had chosen. Being so smart, probably something really hard, like 19 times 19, and so on.

"So," Sonny said, realizing his voice was not quite back to normal, but not caring. "What'd you bring me this time?"

Vinnie lifted a bag onto the table. Sonny had been half-joking. He hadn't expected more stuff. He didn't look into the bag. But he didn't push it away, either.

Finally, Vinnie said, "They really did tell me you're not eating."

"I get by."

"I know the food is bad."

"I work part-time in the kitchen. I get stuff that isn't just the normal fare."

Vinnie nodded. "Will you let me plan lunch for us next Friday?"

Sonny looked at him, disbelieving. "How?"

"We can have a picnic. I can get one of those trailers any time."

Sonny laughed at that. "Fuck off."

"Families sign up for them, Sonny. It's okay. They have TVs, kitchens, games, stuff to do. And no guards breathing down your neck."

"I don't want people thinking stuff...getting the wrong idea," Sonny said unhappily.

Vinnie rolled his eyes. "There's a basketball game on in the afternoon. You wanna see it with 60 other guys sweating and belching beside you? Huh?"

Sonny crossed his arms over his chest. He didn't like this plan. He didn't like it at all. Being stuck with Vinnie all afternoon? That wasn't going to work at all.

"I'll bring Sing's Chinese. Whatever you want."

At the thought of real Chinese food, the good stuff, Sonny felt his stomach respond. Well, he wasn't dead yet. Let Vinnie seduce him with food? Fuck. That might just work. He'd been craving good Chinese food since he'd gotten in.

Okay, he'd let Vinnie feed him once a week. But that was it. That was where he drew the line.

They sat in silence for another few minutes. Then Vinnie said, "Wanna play some cards?"

Sonny shrugged. "What the hell."

* * *

Sonny felt like shit in his orange coveralls. Vinnie looked, well, sensational. He had on a black jacket over black cargo pants and a white cotton pullover shirt. Vinnie wore white and black a lot for their visits. He looked crisp and sharp in both.

But it was none of Sonny's concern. Vinnie might look like some mythical half-god, Perseus without his winged white horse, but it was all a disguise. A ruse.

But the Chinese food was good. And the basketball game even better. Before he knew it, the afternoon was over.

He was not going to get used to this, though. He was not going to allow himself to look forward to Fridays now, just because Vinnie was nice to him, or because Vinnie was so patient with his moods, or because Vinnie wore white. The food was good, sure, and Vinnie promised to bring something equally delicious next time, but that didn't mean Sonny cared. No. Not at all.

And when he finally got out? He didn't know what he'd do, but he sure as hell wasn't going to stick around. No matter how much good Chinese food Vinnie fed him – and man, he'd been starving for it – that didn't make up for anything.

There were acts of contrition, yes, but there were also things that no amount of contrition could change. Disloyalty was one of them. What did Vinnie know about that? A hell of a lot, Sonny ventured. Maybe if they hadn't been lovers, it wouldn't be so goddamn hard. Maybe. But as far as Sonny was concerned, there was no way out of this one for Vinnie.

* * *

Weeks passed. Vinnie brought pizzas, subs, more Chinese, beer, junk food, lasagna from Luigi's, one of Sonny's favorites. He brought Sonny a Rubik's cube that Sonny could not, for the life of him, figure out. He ended up giving it away. He brought decks of cards, board games, books, magazines, crossword and numbers puzzles, along with necessities he thought Sonny could use, more soaps, toothpaste, hand lotion, soft towels, a feather pillow. He always asked Sonny if there was anything he needed, but Sonny always said no. He wasn't about to request anything from Vinnie and be beholden to him. Never!

One day, about three months into his sentence, Sonny asked, “Vinnie, why aren’t you back in the field? Why are you still here?”

Vinnie looked away. “It’s a really long story.”

Sonny glanced at the trailer clock. It was 12:30. They’d just finished eating. “We got hours. No interruptions.”

Vinnie just shook his head.

“What? You’re not gonna tell me? Like I don’t deserve an explanation? After everything? Huh?”

Vinnie looked slightly shaken. “The game’s on right now. I thought you wanted to watch.”

Sonny crossed his arms, stood up. “I don’t need to hang out here anymore. I hate it anyway!” He headed for the door.

“Sonny.”

Sonny put his hand on the latch. “What!” He didn’t turn.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because.” He knew he sounded like a petulant kid.

“It’s just...not that big a deal.”

But to Sonny, the way Vinnie said it, it sounded like a very big deal. He turned, watching him. Vinnie’s eyes looked shattered, afraid, even.

“It has to do with me,” Sonny guessed.

Vinnie didn’t answer.

“If you threw your life away for me, you’re more fucked up than I ever believed.”

Vinnie swallowed hard.

“Vinnie?”

Vinnie finally met his gaze.

Sonny went back to the table, sat down. “Tell me,” he said, although this time it wasn’t a demand. Just a soft request.

“What do you remember?” Vinnie asked him.

Sonny shrugged. "I don't remember getting hurt. But you mean after the ambulance came?"

Vinnie nodded, rocking slightly back in his chair, assessing him with those sweet blue eyes of his that used to drive Sonny so crazy.

Sonny looked away. "I guess a lot of yelling."

Vinnie waited.

"And I guess you kinda freaked out." He frowned. "Right?"

Vinnie nodded almost imperceptibly.

Sonny let out a painful laugh. "I remember asking the ambulance driver to hit me and knock me out. I didn't want to be there. I didn't want to hear you, or see what you were doing. There were guys grabbing at you...I don't know. I didn't want to see it. That's all I remember."

Vinnie took a deep breath, let his chair back down. He put his hands flat on the table. "It's really very simple," he said quietly. "They couldn't send you up on murder charges because I destroyed the tape and refused to testify." He looked right at Sonny, full on. "They wanted to send me to prison. Instead, I got demoted."

Sonny's eyes widened. Then he couldn't breathe. Then when he could breathe he felt sick, disgusted. "You stupid bastard," he whispered.

Vinnie let out a puff of air, looked thoroughly disgusted himself. "What was I supposed to do? I was compromised anyway!"

"Compromised?"

Vinnie's eyes suddenly looked prickly, shiny, full. "Don't play dumb! I was in love with you!"

Sonny felt like he wanted to break something. Instead, he stayed very still, hands close in his lap so Vinnie couldn't see them shaking.

After awhile, Vinnie said, as if no time had passed, "So now I live in Pennsylvania. I work four ten-hour days a week in the city at the FBI offices there. Sunday through Wednesday. Behind a desk."

"Pennsylvania?" Sonny felt stupid. He couldn't think of anything else to say.

Vinnie just nodded. "It's nice. A couple months ago I bought a house. Lots of trees. Real cute. Like gingerbread and Christmas. No one bothers me there. I like it just fine."

Sonny felt like he was talking to a stranger. "Gingerbread and Christm...?" He didn't finish, just shook his head.

“They were going to force me to testify. For three days, while you were in the hospital, they threatened me, grilled me.” Vinnie looked down at his lap. “My own mother told me you were no good even after I confessed to her how much I cared, how good you were to me, how dirty I felt. She was ashamed of me for feeling that way.” He swallowed hard, looked up. His voice started to shake a little, but remained clear. “I was so confused. I got a lawyer to stop them all. I told him everything. He said I had rights. I didn’t have to testify if I didn’t want to under the guise of us being...partners...like...you know....”

Sonny stared at him. He wanted him to stop, but he’d been the one to ask for it, so he stayed quiet.

“They threatened to fire me. Have me arrested. But I had rights there, too. So I got to keep my job, and the lawyer, well, I’m still paying off his bill. Anyway, then there was no case against you.” He gave a sheepish smile. “They were so pissed. The D.A. made your deal. I couldn’t get that broken. You probably could’ve beaten it, but they wouldn’t let me see you to tell you that.”

“Christ.” Sonny put his hands on the table, patting the surface nervously.

“And needless to say, after all that, the total irony is that my mother isn’t speaking to me again.” He let out a short laugh.

“Vinnie...,” he said, maybe a little too softly. Then he shook his head.

Vinnie got up, ignoring him, and went to the TV, turning it on. The game was about to start.

Sonny got up, went to the fridge and got two beers. Then he joined Vinnie on the couch and they watched the game. Nothing more was said.

* * *

Sonny had a week to think about their conversation. There was no way Vinnie was going to manipulate him. Make him feel guilty, or sorry for him. He hadn’t asked for anything from him. He kept telling himself that, over and over, during the day and right before sleep. He kept the internal dialog going and going. He would not feel guilt over this. He would not be sorry for Vinnie. Not that traitor.

The next Friday, Vinnie brought Chinese. When they were done eating, Sonny said, “I didn’t ask you to do all that, you know.”

“All what?”

“Destroy evidence. Fuck up your career. Piss off your mom. Get a lawyer. Fucking freak out on everybody.”

Vinnie watched him warily.

Sonny said, irritated, “You should’ve listened to your damn mother! You don’t owe me anything!”

Calm but deadly, Vinnie said, “I didn’t do it because I owed you.”

They assessed each other. Finally, Sonny said, “You’re not gonna get me to feel guilty over this.”

“Jesus, Sonny! I’m not trying to make you feel guilty. I’m the one who destroyed you! And afterward, I wasn’t going to continue to do it. I couldn’t!”

“I lost everything anyway!”

“Let me tell you something. You would’ve been heading in that direction, losing everything eventually, without me ever being there.”

That stung. Sonny wanted to punch him. “I loved that casino!” he said hotly.

Vinnie stood, gathering up their lunch trash. “Yeah, as much as you could ever love anything, you did love that casino.”

Sonny felt the dig, forgot that he didn’t care, that none of this mattered. Forgot that he was just letting Vinnie feed him until it was time to go for good. “Fuck you!”

And that was it for the afternoon. Sonny left, found the guard, and went back to his cell. He never looked back to see if Vinnie watched, or wanted him back, or fucking just wanted him. He didn’t want to see. He didn’t want to know.

He lay back on his bunk and slept until dinner call.

* * *

He waited for Friday, trying not to count the days, or think about it at all. But the more he tried not to think, the more his mind worried about it. He’d basically walked off last week, leaving Vinnie holding the trash. If that wasn’t a “by your leave” then nothing was. Why should Vinnie come back? Would he?

He tried not to care. Tried to concentrate on reading, or puzzles, or counting cracks in the walls again. He knew the 19 times tables by heart now.

He tried not to think that Vinnie had saved him if not from an actual death sentence, then from life in the pen. Tried not to consider that Vinnie had chosen him over even his own mother. He didn’t want to know any of it. He kept telling himself that if Vinnie didn’t come back, that would be best for both of them.

But when Friday came, he was literally starving. The food was hellish. He ate very little. Once a week he could count on something good, and maybe some extra treats to take to his cell afterward. Vinnie brought him chocolate bars and fruit rolls and peanuts and gum. He was allowed to take all of it with him every time. How Vinnie got that arranged, he didn’t know. He tried not to care.

But his stomach cared. The hunger pangs seemed to know what day it was, increasing as Friday morning went by. The pain was the worst it had ever been. And he caught himself staring at the clock, counting the minutes.

When the guard finally came, something inside him let loose, and the tension he'd been feeling subsided instantly.

So, Vinnie had returned.

He realized his breathing was funny. The pain in his stomach changed, then finally lessened, as he followed the guard outside.

Sonny entered the trailer, glancing at the table. There was Luigi's lasagna. And wedges of dripping chocolate cake. And a basket of apples and oranges.

Sonny felt his eyes grow instantly hot. "You came back," he whispered, still not looking at him. He bit his lower lip hard and clenched his eyes closed.

"Don't be stupid. Of course I did." Vinnie came to him, put his hands gently on his shoulders, then all the way around him. Sonny gasped once into that familiar chest, that enticing sweet scent, then got hold of himself, pushing Vinnie away.

Vinnie dropped his arms and said, as if nothing had happened, "Are you hungry?"

Sonny replied shakily, "Starving."

Vinnie handed him a napkin.

After they ate, they played some cards and watched some TV. They talked a little, about sports, the weather, TV, but not much else. It was just enough to be together.

* * *

Half-way into his sentence, Sonny got into a fight. It wasn't much of a fight, and no one was really hurt, but Sonny got a day of solitary for it, and a black eye and a bruised cheek.

When Vinnie saw him, to Sonny's mind he kind of over-reacted. Sonny said to him, "Well, I am in prison, Vinnie."

Vinnie had been beside himself. He'd touched Sonny on the face, then grabbed his arm holding on a little too tight. "I'm okay," Sonny said, pulling back. "Jesus!"

But Vinnie was not placated. "What happened?"

Sonny shrugged. "Some guy in the kitchens made a crack. That's all."

Vinnie shook his head. “A crack?”

Sonny shifted his gaze to the floor. “About us. About you visiting every week.”

“This was never supposed to happen.” He grabbed Sonny’s shoulders, as if he couldn’t see him well enough from where he stood.

“What?”

“Where were the guards?” Vinnie asked.

“They were there. We just both got in a few good punches before they broke us up. I’m fine. Although solitary for a day was not that fun. But it wasn’t too terrible.”

Vinnie gripped him tighter.

Sonny said, “Vinnie, let go.” He brought his hands up, knocking Vinnie’s hands away. “I said let go!” Then he walked over to the table and said, “I’m hungry; let’s eat.”

* * *

The whole time Sonny was in prison, they spent every Friday afternoon together. Against his will, Sonny found himself looking forward to Fridays, and kept telling himself it was for the good food. Vinnie had great taste in food. And he never skimped. There were always leftovers.

As for the company, Sonny could not have asked for better. Vinnie was so good to him. But he couldn’t help but keep him at a distance. Vinnie had hurt him so bad. He didn’t want to think about it, or the past. But sometimes he couldn’t help it. Sometimes he woke from dreams about Vinnie, damp and shaking. But he made himself forget them. Made himself see Vinnie as more of a stranger now. Not the guy he was once in love with. Not the beautiful young man he’d given everything to.

Vinnie never made a move on him, and Sonny never encouraged it. There was a nice bed in the back of the trailer, but it never got any use. Not by either of them. He often wondered what Vinnie was thinking, if Vinnie still wanted him. He saw the looks Vinnie sometimes gave him, looks of affection, looks of bemusement and charm. Sonny charmed people. He knew that. It was his way. But that didn’t mean they wanted him. Did Vinnie still want him? He tried not to think about it, but he was pretty sure Vinnie did. Why else did Vinnie keep coming every Friday without fail? Even that one week Vinnie had a cold, and his eyes were red-rimmed, he still came. He never failed Sonny on that count.

The physically closest Vinnie ever got to him, aside from the time Sonny fainted, or the time Sonny almost broke down in his arms, was being defensive for him over the black eye. And once, close to the seven month mark, Vinnie had suddenly gotten a desperate look just as Sonny was getting ready to leave. It was 5 o’clock, time to go. But Vinnie seemed reluctant. Sad, even.

“What’s up?” Sonny had asked.

Vinnie merely shook his head, mumbling, "I just miss you." Then he grabbed Sonny's shoulders and rubbed up and down on the outsides of Sonny's arms. It was as if he was afraid to hug Sonny. Well, that was good because Sonny didn't want Vinnie hugging him. And Vinnie seemed to know that. Finally, Vinnie gave a sigh of frustration, then let go.

Sonny stared at him, then gently said, "We're paying our dues, right?" He hadn't expected that to come out of him. He hadn't planned to say it. And he hadn't planned to say "we."

But Vinnie's pained look sharpened. His shoulders sagged. "I just hate this," he finally said.

"Yeah," Sonny replied quietly. "Me, too."

* * *

In the eighth month, true to his lawyer's word, Sonny was up for parole. The Friday before the hearing, Vinnie told him, "I'll be there. I'll put in a good word."

"You don't have to come," Sonny said. He was feeling strange, disappointed almost. If he got out, what would happen to Friday afternoons?

"Yes, I do."

Sonny shook his head. "Why?"

"Because they'll ask you certain questions. Like if you have anywhere to go. And I can answer them."

Sonny felt himself back away mentally. He had plans. They had been firm plans once. Now he waffled. He wanted to go away. Far away from all of it. Even from Vinnie. It was too much for him to handle. He needed to make a fresh start. At least, that's what he had kept telling himself night after night alone in his cell as the dim, garish yellow lights went out and the dreams began, dreams of Vinnie in his arms, dreams he grumbled over and told himself he hated. Dreams that had ruined his whole life.

"Sonny, I have a spare room in my house. It's fixed up for you. It's been waiting for you. You have a place to go."

Sonny shook his head. "Maybe I don't want to go with you."

Vinnie pressed his lips tight together in anger. "Maybe you don't have anywhere else to go," he said.

Sonny said, "Yeah, maybe they took everything I ever had, but that doesn't mean I need hand-outs, dammit!"

"It's not a hand-out."

"You don't owe me!" Sonny yelled.

“The room’s not there because I owe you,” Vinnie retorted. “How many times do I have to tell you? I’m not doing any of this because I feel like I owe you!”

“What, is it because you feel guilty?”

Vinnie shook his head, looking annoyed. “Sonny, you have to tell them you have somewhere to go, otherwise they could deny the parole. You’d do four more months.”

“Maybe I want to do four more months!”

“You’re crazy.”

“Yep. Always was.”

“Please,” Vinnie said. “If you want to get out, tell them you have a place to go. I’ll tell them. It’s set up. You won’t be getting into more trouble in their eyes because they’ll know I’m FBI. They’ll figure you’re rehabbed. Tell them what they want to hear. Then, if you don’t want to go with me you don’t have to. Okay?”

Sonny stared at him, at those gorgeous eyes. He didn’t trust himself. Them living together? Things would get out of hand. It was the way they were together. They gravitated to each other. Even now, he tried to harden his gaze, but his eyes got hot.

He didn’t trust himself to live with Vinnie.

* * *

The hearing went very well. It was Vinnie’s doing. All of it. Two days later, Sonny got his parole. And Vinnie was there to pick him up.

They greeted each other verbally, but there was no hugging, no touching. Sonny had a duffel bag of stuff and Vinnie politely offered to carry it, but Sonny shook his head. He tried to harden himself. He told himself he was only going with Vinnie for now. But still he felt weird, almost shaky. And the outside world was a strange shock after being locked up for eight months.

Vinnie led him to his car. When they got in, he turned to Sonny. “I’ll take you anywhere you want to go. Okay? But you might want to stop by my place first. There’s some stuff of yours there.”

Sonny turned quizzically. “My stuff?”

“Everything was taken by the I.R.S. and the cops, but I got in under the wire before they got there, used my I.D., and got some things for you.”

“Like what?”

Vinnie shrugged. “Just some of your clothes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know. I just kept them for you.”

Sonny sighed, trying not to think about it. But his heart skipped. There was a strange longing pain in his stomach at the thought. Vinnie had gotten his clothes? What the fuck was he doing? Finally Sonny said, “Yeah, okay.”

It was a two hour drive to Vinnie’s house. Sonny had not realized he’d been making this long of a trip, doubled, once a week every Friday for eight months. Well, Vinnie was dedicated if nothing else. Like a loyal dog, never knowing when to quit.

Sonny looked at him again. Loyal? Why had he thought that? Vinnie was about as disloyal as they came.

Now Sonny felt confused, the pain his stomach growing. He glanced out the window. Why had he thought of Vinnie as loyal? After all this time? After everything Vinnie had done to him, to them, to the intimate memory of what they’d once shared together?

He looked at him again. Vinnie was wearing that white cotton shirt tucked into blue jeans. His leather jacket lay across the seat in the back. His body looked slimmer but compact.

Sonny wore jeans and a plaid button up shirt from the prison stores. He’d earned barely enough to buy them by working eight months in the kitchens. He had ditched his bloody tux at the hospital. The hospital had issued him green scrubs when he was released because he’d had no clothes. He wasn’t about to wear those coming out of prison, and had ditched them as well.

Sonny had gotten thinner in prison, but not soft. That was some comfort. He was always hungry, but he’d gotten used to it. But now his hunger took on a different tone. He was out. The world was open and blue and light, and they drove down the highway into green trees and fresh air. He wanted to eat it all up. It was wonderfully distracting.

Finally, he asked Vinnie to stop.

Vinnie pulled off and Sonny got out of the car, walking on grass, walking a little way into the trees. He touched the bark of one, breathed in deep. Vinnie stood by the car waiting, that loyal dog look again.

Loyal?

Fuck!

Vinnie was grinning at him. “I wanted to do the same thing when I got out,” he called over to him.

Sonny came back to the car. “Everything looks really bright,” he observed. He walked up to Vinnie smiling.

“Yeah. You look better, too.” Vinnie gave him the once over, not dirty or anything, just sweet. “A little thin, but healthy.”

Vinnie looked as bright as the trees to Sonny, but he didn't say it. Instead, he got back into the car and said, “Let's go see where you live.”

Vinnie smiled.

* * *

They pulled into a driveway flanked by maples and birch and elm. The house was very pretty, set back a ways from the street, and it did look a little like a big gingerbread house. It was Victorian, but not too ornate. It was a two-story.

They got out and Sonny smelled the air, fresh and alive with growing things. He inhaled, falling in love instantly with the trees and the soil and the little beds of flowers by the porch. After the terrible scents of prison, the hated scents he had never grown accustomed to, this was heaven.

Okay, so maybe Vinnie had good taste. It was very peaceful here. Just the thing Sonny craved right now. But that didn't mean he was going to stay. And if he did, it would only be until he got on his feet. There were a lot of things he could do. He was a businessman. He knew business. He could certainly come up with something.

Vinnie led him through the front door. Inside smelled good, too. Fresh. Piney. And there was something cooking in the kitchen maybe?

“Look around all you want. Your room's upstairs, off to the right. Want me to show you?”

“Where's my stuff?” Sonny didn't mean for that question to come out so cold. “I mean, I just want to know what you managed to get, what all I'll be needing, you know.”

“Come on.” Vinnie took the stairs two at a time. Sonny took his time, looking around at the pale wood walls, the comfortable couch and TV, a fireplace already stacked with wood. This was a side of Vinnie he had never seen before. It was okay. It was peaceful and clean and unassuming.

Upstairs, Vinnie stood to the side of the door and let Sonny enter first. Sonny looked back at him. Vinnie shrugged. “In the closet.”

Sonny went and opened it. Inside were a half-dozen silk Armani suits, all his favorites. And there were two overcoats, sweaters and jackets and jeans, and more silk and wool trousers. The closet was packed with his stuff. He looked on the floor. Shoes. A dozen pair. All his favorites. There was so much of it. He looked over at Vinnie, frowning. “You said you got some stuff.”

Vinnie nodded. “Like I said, I couldn't get it all.”

Sonny thought there had to be about thirty thousand dollars worth of clothes in that closet. Sonny looked at the bed. Those were his pillow covers and spread. He looked at the dressers, two of them. There were boxes sitting on top and he opened them to find all his gold jewelry, his rings, tie tacks, cufflinks. Another box held two Rolexes. Neither was the one he'd been wearing at the end. He had never counted on getting that one back, though. But he'd never thought he'd see this stuff again, either.

He opened the drawers of the dressers and found wool scarves, silk scarves and matching handkerchiefs that had come with the designer suits, socks, underwear, sweats. Everything he would need.

"Oh," Vinnie said. "And this." He stepped into the room, closing the door to expose the wall behind it. There, leaning against the wall, was the case with the gun in it his brother Dave had bought him, and which had been delivered as a surprise to Sonny months after Dave's death. It was the fourteen karat gold-plated limited edition number one Old West rifle that had nearly brought Sonny to tears when he'd received it right before everything had gone bad. Right before he'd made, on the bad advice and unbearable pressure of Mahoney and others who kept telling him he was getting weak, a slew of very bad decisions all in a row.

Sonny gulped, then looked at Vinnie in disbelief. He knew his mouth was open. He knew he probably looked like a fool, but he'd had no idea Vinnie had done all this. None whatsoever.

"One more thing," Vinnie said, smiling softly. He went to the bed, knelt and put his hands underneath. From there, he pulled out a duffel. He opened it. It was stuffed with neatly wrapped five thousand dollar packs of one hundred dollar bills.

"The Zorhatzo money?" Sonny asked.

"I remembered where you hid it. I was the only other one who knew, remember?"

Sonny shook his head. He had to be dreaming.

"One million, three hundred thirty-two thousand one hundred and fifty dollars are left of it. I guess you spent the rest, eh?" Vinnie said.

"Ah." He almost choked. "Vinnie...?"

"So you got your stuff, and you got money. You can do whatever you want now," Vinnie said, standing, wiping his hands on his thighs. "You can go anywhere. You're free." His eyes looked sad, but he smiled wide. "I made sure of it." Then he nodded, turning toward the door. "I made dinner. It's been cooking all afternoon in the crock pot. It's miner's stew. Everyone I've ever foisted it on says it's good. It'll be ready in a little while."

Then he walked out the door leaving Sonny pole-axed, standing in the middle of the room and trying to figure out where all the oxygen went.

* * *

With just the two of them, eating together in a quiet house and no demands put upon them, things felt strange, almost awkward.

Sonny felt funny, a little on edge maybe. The pain in his stomach had not lessened. He didn't want to feel beholden to anyone, dammit. Not even Vinnie. But he was also grateful.

After he got up for a second helping of stew, Sonny said, "What the fuck were you thinking?"

"What, you don't like it? You went for seconds."

"My stuff?"

Vinnie got a look in his eyes he couldn't read, almost like he was lost.

Sonny shook his head. "You didn't have to, ya know."

Vinnie glared now. "I know that!" His voice was sharp.

Sonny had to ask him again, even though he knew it would piss Vinnie off. "Did you think you owed it to me?"

Vinnie turned away. "Figure it out, Sonny." He opened the dishwasher and started loading it. Sonny just sat there watching him.

Vinnie came back over to the table and took Sonny's dish and silverware.

"Hey, I wasn't done!"

Vinnie put the plate back down. "Okay."

Sonny made no move for the food. Finally, he said, "I don't want you doing stuff for me!"

Vinnie had a dish towel in his hand. He turned, threw it on the counter and said, "Fine, you do the dishes then." And he walked into the living room.

Sonny did the dishes the old-fashioned way. He took everything out of the dishwasher and put it in the sink, found the soap and washed everything by hand. He had learned to like doing dishes in prison. The warm water on his hands felt good. Almost comforting. When he felt tense, it was almost like a meditation.

He washed and dried everything and found all the places to put them away. Then he turned and wiped down the counters until they glowed. He thought he might take out the trash, but it wasn't full yet, so he decided to let that wait.

Vinnie was in the living room sitting on the couch watching the news. Sonny came in, walked up to him blocking the TV, and said, "All this stuff you've done, it makes me feel weird, funny. That's all I meant."

Vinnie looked up at him, unfolded his legs and put them up on the coffee table. “You keep telling me I don’t owe you. But I’m thinking you’re worried that you feel like you owe me. Well, you don’t. That money’s yours. I didn’t spend a dime of it. I just counted it. And you got your stuff. I did it for you. I wanted to make sure you were okay. That’s all. So you don’t owe me, I don’t owe you, and you can do whatever you want.”

Sonny cocked his head. “I don’t know what I want to do yet.”

“Well, you’re the one who seems to be all in a hurry to do something. Not me. But you can stay here until you decide if you want.”

Sonny pursed his lips. Then he said, hearing his own voice sound as if he were a stupid kid again, “Dammit, quit being so nice to me.”

Then he turned, avoiding the look he knew would be on Vinnie’s face, that look of loss, or grief, and went back upstairs to his room.

* * *

He changed into boxer shorts and a short sleeved lightweight sweatshirt and got into the bed. He was so tired he couldn’t even think. He didn’t want Vinnie to be responsible for him. He didn’t like that feeling at all. But what was he going to do?

His eyes closed and his thoughts faded, even as he contemplated the cash under the bed. So much of it. Enough to start over and then some. But it was no comfort. It felt like something unreal, strange, like that too was Vinnie’s, not his. As if everything in the room, even his clothes, were all Vinnie’s. And Sonny was just pretending they were his things, playing like a kid that anything in this house belonged to him.

Both physically and mentally exhausted, finally his mind and body relaxed and he fell asleep.

* * *

When he woke, it was very dark. The house was utterly silent. Sonny was shaking but he wasn’t cold and he didn’t remember any dreams. Slowly he sat up.

He knew where he was. The prison cell was far away. The cold scents, the eerie lights, all gone. Everything here smelled good. And the outside was quiet, serene, interrupted now and again by a cricket or a distant rumble of a train.

Sonny started to feel funny again. His stomach felt queasy. Jumpy. Hollow. And his pulse thrummed through it like moths inside him fluttering about, battering him with their wings. He pushed his legs over the side of the bed and stood, thinking he would go to the bathroom, get some water. Earlier he’d found his toothbrush, his toothpaste, all neatly set by the side of the sink. And his razor was there as well. And his comb.

He opened the door and headed down the hall. But he didn't go in the bathroom. Instead, he opened the door to Vinnie's room, walked in, went straight to the bed and stood beside it looking down at him.

Vinnie slept on his side, one arm under his pillow, one arm over it as if hugging it to his chest. In the dim light from the hall, Vinnie looked almost fevered, and very very young, his features smooth, his hair pushed in all directions. But his face looked almost flushed, almost sad.

Sonny looked up at the ceiling, tried to close out the image. But he couldn't. He looked back at him again, lungs quivering, realizing he'd been holding his breath. Vinnie stirred.

Opening his eyes, Vinnie didn't startle. He just looked at Sonny as if he'd been expecting him. Sonny didn't look away. For long seconds they stared at each other. Then Vinnie moved, pushing himself up in the bed on one elbow. He had on his white tank, the one he always slept in. He pulled the covers all the way back from the side of the bed and, still leaning on his elbow, waited.

The hollowness in his stomach widened. Sonny felt pulled hard, like a rope was around his body and someone was yanking it. But it wasn't a bad feeling. It was just so damn vulnerable, like he had nothing left anymore that was his. Nothing but everything this one man had given him.

Once it had been the reverse. Vinnie had had nothing, or so Sonny had thought, and Sonny had given him everything.

The memory made his lungs tremble, his throat ache.

He knelt into the mattress, crawled over to Vinnie and lay down against his warmth. Vinnie lifted the covers over him, then pulled him into his arms.

Sonny fell into the embrace, said breathlessly, "Don't." But even as he spoke he pushed himself closer. Then his face was pressed against Vinnie's sweet scent, against the soft cotton tank over Vinnie's broad chest, and Sonny realized he was breathing very hard, and had been the whole time he'd been standing beside Vinnie's bed, as if he'd been running a long way and now couldn't quite catch his breath. He didn't understand why he couldn't get enough air. And his throat hurt. What the fuck was wrong with him?

He felt Vinnie's body pressing against him as Vinnie rubbed his back gently. Vinnie kissed the top of his head, arms tightening around him, then said softly, "Shhh. I just want you to be okay. That's all."

Sonny wrapped one arm around Vinnie's waist. When he caught his breath, he said, "I know why you did all of it." He did know. He'd always known. Not because Vinnie owed him, but because Vinnie loved him. Had never stopped loving him.

Vinnie nodded; his chin brushed against Sonny's forehead. "Okay, then. I'm glad we got that all straightened out."

Sonny moved his face up and kissed him lightly on the mouth, like air, like soft satin barely flowing against tender skin. He kept kissing him, feeling Vinnie's lips move slightly into a smile, and he kept pressing, caressing with his mouth, slowly, gently, feeling the fire flame up between them, feeling

everything that had been there before it all went to hell, and then feeling even more. He moved over Vinnie as Vinnie brought one hand up to cup his cheek and chin and started returning the kiss. Sonny still kissed him only very lightly, mouth still closed and Vinnie mirrored him. Barely pressing. Just feeling. Almost instantly their bodies shifted, started to fit together, like old times, like it was as natural as breathing. They didn't even have to try. They just fit.

It was like coming home.

* * *

If you enjoyed this story, you can find sequels to it on Natasha Solten's Livejournal for free here:
<http://natashasolten.livejournal.com/>

You can also buy Natasha's Wiseguy fanzine – "The War Inside" – right here at fanzinesplus.com!
[The War Inside](#)