

"Got another case for you, pal. Have fun with this one."

The police chief closed the office door and tossed the case report on Vinny's desk. Vinny slid his coffee mug out of the way and glanced up at his boss. Black coffee rose over the mug's rim and left another dark ring on the policeman's desk. "Another murder? This is the third one this week."

"You're our best detective. And this one is ahh..." the chief's voice trailed off as he searched for the right word. "...different." Vinny raised his eyebrows as he scanned the report.

"Signs of struggle, bruising, dismemberment....I've seen this before."

The detective set down the case file and pulled a bottle of scotch out of his desk drawer. The wooden drawer released a harsh screech as it opened, but Vinny had become accustomed to the sound. "Liquor? It's not even noon!" bellowed the chief. "What's a matter with you!" His voice was grumbly and powerful. Vinny saw the musty books on his shelf vibrate, but attributed it to imagination. The detective took a sip of his scotch and shot the chief a cold stare.

"We've got a serial killer on our hands."

Vinny stormed into the police station the next day. His suit jacket flailed behind him. Every step he took was strong and deliberate, each in the direction of the chief's office. An intern greeted him in the hallway but the detective said nothing in response. He arrived at the door to the office and seized the handle. The chief tried his best to look busy as the door flung open.

"A partner?" Vinny yelled. "I work alone! You know that!" His hands curled into fists. He had no intentions to harm his supervisor, but that was only in the interest of staying employed. The chief set his hands on the desk and leaned forward in his office chair.

"There's nothing I can do, Vinny. He's a transfer from Chicago and you're the only one without a partner. I'm sending you both to the scene of the murder. He's waiting outside, so get going. Try to make a good first impression." Vinny didn't work well with others,

and the chief knew it. The snarling detective mumbled various expletives to himself and left the office. The intern that greeted Vinny on his way in stayed quiet as the policeman thundered toward the front doors.

The partner in question's name was Zaq. He stood casually outside the station in a white undershirt and jeans. "You Vinny?" he asked upon seeing his new coworker. "I'm Zaq, nice to meet you."

"Get in the car." Vinny sputtered. The two men entered the vehicle. Vinny drove the car out of the parking lot, and began driving to the scene. Zaq felt like he should say something despite the icy looks he was receiving.

"Is something wrong bruh? You alright?"

"You haven't seen nothing yet, kid. This town will rip you apart," said Vinny in welcome.

"I'm sorry, what?" replied Zaq. His long blond hair fell into his eyes when he turned toward Vinny. "I'm sorry for whatever you think I did wrong. But believe me, I didn't sign up to be transferred here, and I certainly didn't ask to be your partner."

"Listen here buddy," retorted Vinny. "You don't know nothing. Everything you think you know, either isn't true or doesn't apply here. This city will kill you. Have you seen how many violent crimes there were last year? You'll either get murdered walking home at night, or this city will crush your soul to the point where you legally could be considered dead. Lets hope it's the second one, because I don't want to solve another murder."

Zaq hesitantly opened his mouth, but quickly realized there was nothing to say. He fell back into his chair. Vinny wasn't nearly as cynical about his job as he made it seem, but he was outraged. The older detective had worked alone for his entire career, and had no qualms with the solitude. The worst part of his day was the forced conversation between him and the receptionist at the front desk of the station. The strained attempts at a friendly dialogue felt unnecessary, redundant. He was never a people-person, and always despised the social customs everyone seemed utilize.

Despite his adversity in conversation, Vinny soon acknowledged that Zaq wasn't at fault, and thought about apologizing. But an apology seemed too courteous, as if Vinny meant to be friends with his new partner. Regrettably, the idea of friendship was almost foreign to the detective. He thought he worked better alone. In reality, Vinny had never worked any other way.

It was night when the two men reached their destination. The scene was a charming petting zoo, complete with a kitchen and dining hall. The pleasant business was overwhelmed by a dark and desolate ambience, evoked by bright police tape and wayward flashlight beams. A white picket fence surrounded the property, but its appearance was haunting in the dim moonlight. Dirt and other unidentifiable substances saturated the air. Vinny coughed as he and Zaq were led to the main entrance.

Their leader was a spirited forensic analyst. Vinny realized he had worked with the man for years and never got his name. Fortunately, the nametag on his dress shirt said Franco. Vinny's often-ineffective moral conscience screamed words of disappointment. He had collaborated with the man to solve hundreds of crimes; the least he could do was remember the guy's name. The alcoholic tried to make up for his impoliteness with small talk.

"So Franco. I don't think you've met Zaq." Zaq shook hands with the forensic specialist, and the two cops exchanged greetings. Vinny tried to continue the discourse as best he could. "By the way, Franco, ahh, why do you wear nice clothes to a crime scene? Just curious." In reality, Franco's choice of clothing wasn't particularly impressive. He wore a dark blue button up and khakis. The man's confidence looked better than his clothing did, and that's what Vinny noticed.

"Well my mother, bless her heart, always told me dress for the job I wanna have, not the one I'm in. And don't wanna analyze blood spatter forever, ya know, I wanna be a news anchor or something. I'm talkin' the big time networks, NBC or something, the guy your family sees at nine o'clock like 'Quiet down, Late Night with Franco's on!' But whatever, lets get movin'." Vinny was almost inspired by Franco's words. Zaq however, looked

over the aspiring anchor's shoulder, preoccupied by his own thoughts. The two detectives followed Franco through the cafeteria. Franco tried to explain the murder.

"The body was found in the kitchen. The injuries are bizarre: arm removal, a hell of a beating. But this time they kept him in a freezer. You ever seen frozen blood before?" Vinny, still captivated, shook his head no. The policeman entertained the idea of "Late Night with Franco."

"Well I have. And guess what, we found goat fur. Can't explain that. Granted, it's a petting zoo, but I don't think they kept goats in the meat locker. In my opinion, the no-arms thing is the worst part about all of this. Viciously bludgeon a man, sure, but take his arms? Crazy. Also, a lot of the animals are missing. It's hard to tell if this is related to the murder, but we've been getting reports of animal theft for a while now, all across town. You try and put those clues together, I'm just the forensics guy."

As Franco's spiel concluded, the detectives got their first look at the body. The corpse sat in the center of the room, surrounded by cabinets of meat and frozen foods. Every surface in the small room was a cold, stainless steel. Vinny grazed his hand along the door frame of the freezer as he walked in. "Huh," he muttered. "This looks worse than I thought it would. The blood, and the... Wow?" He looked toward his partner, whom became visibly distraught upon seeing the victim. Zaq had his hands on his knees, struggling to not vomit.

"Zaq, what's a matta? You alright?" The question sounded a little too sympathetic for Vinny's liking. However, the simple phrase triggered a dialogue between the two partners that wasn't outwardly bitter.

"I'm fine pal, don't worry about it. Must've... had some bad fish or something."

Franco, eager to make a good impression, chimed in. "Ya know I don't eat fish. Or gluten. It's a silent killer. But that's just me."

"Maybe I'll stop eating fish," Zaq murmured.

Vinny left his nauseated partner to further explore the peculiarities of the scene. The most out of place thing in the kitchen freezer was obviously the armless, chilled body that lounged in the center of the room. The bloodied corpse was like a centerpiece, a flash of color in an otherwise barren expanse of silver metal. Vinny barely noticed the particulates scattered over one of the cabinets. He stepped over the remains to further inspect the potential clue. “Franco get over here! I got something!” Vinny shouted. Franco tumbled in.

“I’m here, I’m here, what’s the matter?”

“I’m not too sure, pal. But it’s got to be something. Look at it.” Franco moved uncomfortably close to Vinny to examine the miniscule fragments.

“Oh yeah, one of our other forensics guys saw that earlier. I heard him say something about it. His name’s Jimmy, great guy. I met his wife once.”

“I don’t care about that buddy, what do think this stuff is?”

“Ya know I’m not sure.” Franco’s eyebrows tilted inward. “But someone probably took a sample, to look at under a microscope or something. They’ll know what it is soon.”

“Well if you find out tell me. This could be important.”

Vinny shuffled out of the freezer into the cafeteria. Zaq sat joylessly on the floor next to the trashcan. The trashcan smelled like vomit. “You need a ride somewhere?” asked Vinny. He felt obligated to ask, but didn’t want a positive answer.

“No I should be fine. Thanks though. Ya know I’ve been thinking, what kinda person could do that? Vinny’s blank stare led Zaq to clarify. “The murderer, I mean, to the victim. Like, how? He took the dude’s *arms off*. That’s not an accident, that’s gotta take a while to do. Hour or two, maybe. This guy spent an hour dismembering another person, and every time he looked down at what he was doin’, he thought ‘This is good, I should continue doing this.’ Think here, this guy has employers, parents, friends. You know you’re hangin’ out with the wrong people when your best friend becomes the

'Arm-Stealing Bandit'. Seriously. Who ever did this must have some serious issues, ya know? I don't think we're dealing with Old Joe-Blow the Murderer here."

"I lost you at 'Arm-Stealing Bandit'. I'll see you tomorrow." Vinny drove home alone, but Zaq's ideas followed him. The wounds on the victim must've taken dedication; his partner was right. The thought that someone possessed that much commitment to another's suffering was unsettling, but Vinny slept fine.

He wasn't planning on coming in to work the next day until the chief called him. "Hope I'm not bothering you. That stuff you found at the scene? Wood shavings. Forensics traced them back to an old construction warehouse on the outskirts of town. That type of tree's been endangered for a while now, so no one in the last fifty years could have its sawdust except for this place. I'm sending you and Zaq over there." Vinny turned off the TV in front of him and stood up. "Driving there now, boss."

He saw the warehouse teetering over the horizon miles before he arrived. The building was essentially a massive steel cube, crimson in color from years of rust. Vinny met Zaq at the base of the storehouse. Zaq leaned against his car, and spoke first.

"You ready? I'm surprised no one else is here. Maybe we should wait." He looked toward Vinny for his assessment.

"I came here to whoop ass and drink scotch," countered Vinny. "And I'm all out of scotch. So let's get going."

The duo walked alone to the doors of the building. Vinny opened the steel doors and entered first. Zaq followed him. It smelled strongly of sawdust and the floor was littered with construction equipment. Sunlight shined in from the various holes in the walls. It was astounding the storehouse remained standing. The two walked deeper into the warehouse without seeing anything unusual. "It's quiet. Too quiet," whispered Vinny.

"Hello hello!" declared a grumbly voice. The police chief strolled into view. He wore a grey suit and held a silver pistol in his right hand. He pointed the gun squarely at Zaq. Zaq slowly raised his hands.

"Put your hands down, you look like a mime," asserted Vinny. He turned toward his boss. "What's this supposed to be?"

"I'm going to kill you." The chief's voice was unforgiving.

"Is this a side-effect of your hemorrhoid medication? What are you doing?"

The chief didn't flinch. "I got plans, buddy. I've spent more than half of my life in the same lousy police station, and I'm done with it. More than done. So I thought, hey, why don't I leave. But I've spent most of my life in front of the same desk, you can't just walk away from that. I wanted more. One thing led to another, and before you know it I had a plan to kill you and your partner here. I'm one murder into it, why stop now?"

Zaq spoke to him in a hushed tone. "Whoa man, you don't have to do this. Really."

Vinny quietly pushed a pile of sawdust together with his shoes. Zaq continued talking. "Put the gun down. Put it down and it's over." The chief looked at Zaq in a way that proved he wouldn't stop now.

Vinny whipped his open hand toward the sawdust. Some slipped between his fingers as he grabbed it, but there was still enough. He launched it into the chief's face. The former chief of police fell to his knees, desperately clawing at his own eyes.

"Can't say I saw that one coming," said Vinny.

He pulled a tinted pair of sunglasses out of his coat and put them on. But the killer's affliction wasn't long-lasting. He screamed and kicked Vinny's legs out from under him. Vinny fell to the ground in pain. Zaq froze for a moment, as the scream seemed to initiate a rumble across the warehouse.

A stampede of goats promptly became visible. They charged toward the three men. Vinny still lay dazed on the floor of the warehouse. The chief, having fully regained vision, kicked Zaq in the stomach. He stumbled backwards, but not before throwing a punch at his adversary. Zaq regained his balance and threw himself at his employer. Both men clasped the other's shoulders. They stumbled forward and back, oblivious to the impending goat herd.

Vinny began to stand. There was no time to waste. The cop sprinted toward Zaq. The goat stampede was imminent, so close the concrete floor began to shake. Vinny used his remaining strength to push Zaq out of the way, but could not escape the mob himself. The chief was sprawled on the floor, and showed no signs of consciousness. Zaq was no longer in the path of the herd, and could do nothing but watch. Vinny and the murderer were caught under the mob.

The Zaq and Franco stood over Vinny's body. Most of the police force had come to see the aftermath of the incident. "Is he alive?" Zaq asked a paramedic. The doctor kneeled down and felt the cop's neck. "No breathing... no pulse... I'm sorry." Franco looked down and shed a single tear. He watched as the body of the chief was carted away. Unconcerned goats strolled the property. Zaq's eyes became watery. Franco strained to maintain composure. "He was three days from retirement," Franco whispered. His voice was unsteady and hushed.

Vinny coughed. He opened his eyes and sat up. He looked at his friends and said, "I need some scotch."