

(This is my obligatory jealous-Vinnie story and was tons of fun to write. And I finally got Sonny and Vinnie in a pool. 10,465 words. Wiseguy. Sonny/Vinnie. First time. Rated: R.)

DANTE

by

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Anyone who has declared someone else to be an idiot, a bad apple, is annoyed when it turns out in the end that he isn't.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Vinnie handed Frank a piece of paper with a name on it. Dante Pelletiri. “The new guy.”

Frank nodded, tilting his head up and to the side, staring at Vinnie. “Sonny’s new favorite, eh?”

Vinnie crossed his arms and looked away. “He’s making it really difficult to do my job.”

Frank chuckled without smiling, humorless. “Quit acting like the jilted girlfriend.”

“I knew you’d make a crack,” Vinnie said, trying not to roll his eyes. “It’s the job, Frank. I need to know who he is, where he comes from, what he’s up to.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“He’s too good to be true.”

“You mean like you? And yet Sonny trusted you from the very beginning...”

“Very funny, Frank.”

“So he’s Sonny’s new driver. You’ve moved up. What’s the difficulty here, sport?”

Vinnie sighed heavily.

“Sonny’s giving him the new Rolexes now? Taking *him* out to fancy dinners?”

Vinnie just glared now.

“Sorry, Vince.” Frank smiled now. “I already know a little bit. We’re always watching, you know. Photo surveillance, background checks. His family was close to Dave and Sonny’s parents. He’s 26. He has a degree from Brown.”

“I already know all that.”

“What’s bothering you, then? That when he smiles he can charm the birds right out of the sky? I’ve seen the photos, Vince. Tall, dark and charming. Did you think you were the only one who could do that?” As if knowing his words might bite, Frank took a step back.

Vinnie saw the move and hated himself just then, because his fingers really were thinking on their own of making a fist, of raising it in Frank’s direction.

“Look,” Frank said, tone almost placating. “You and Sonny are close friends. It makes it easier to do your job. I get it. Then this new guy comes along. But you’re a pro. You can handle it. So quit acting like the jealous lover and get on with it. Quit acting like any of what you’re doing is real.”

At those words, Vinnie startled. *Real?* For him it was all real. That was how he worked. And that was why, some days, the job was so very very difficult.

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Trying not to scowl, Vinnie watched as Sonny put a warm, friendly arm around the younger man’s shoulders, steering him toward his office. Ignored, but knowing he was supposed to follow, Vinnie trailed behind them.

Dante wore a crisp white shirt, a metallic, gray vest tapered perfectly to his slim waist, and matching gray slacks. His tie was cobalt. To match his eyes. His rich, wavy brown hair trailed in a little ducktail into the collar of his shirt. On his honey-tanned hands he wore rings as flashy as Sonny’s, as well as a gold watch (*not* a Rolex) on one wrist, a thin gold identity bracelet on the other. His white smile was fucking beguiling. It spread over his face like laser light, bringing out perfect dimples in each tanned cheek. Perfect pink lips framed perfect white teeth.

By contrast, Vinnie felt completely underdressed since he’d just come from the Marine. He was wearing jeans, a white t-shirt and his blue plaid flannel shirt. His dark bangs were hanging, unkempt, into his eyes.

When Dante opened his mouth to speak, one might expect from such beauty, “Surf’s up, dude,” or “Let’s party on.” Instead, when he approached the office desk, he appeared to

be quoting something from Neitsche as he gazed upon the outstanding view of downtown Atlantic City from Sonny's plate glass windows.

Vinnie hated him.

If there was any consolation, at least Sonny hadn't asked Vinnie to share his accommodations with the imposing new Adonis, the way he had with Lorenzo. If that had happened, Vinnie didn't know what he would've done. Well, nothing, really. He would have had to have said yes. But then? Maybe strangle the guy in his sleep with the fucking cobalt tie.

Now Vinnie caught himself up short, chastising his own thoughts. Was this what Tony might've felt like when Sonny hired Vinnie? Resentful, jealous, competitive? Vinnie was *not* like Tony at all and never wanted to even think about that brainless ape. So when he felt like saying things to Dante like, "You're new here; you better watch yourself," he held his tongue. He neither challenged the guy nor befriended him. He kept his manners, and his wits about him.

But he still hated him.

Sonny had a hop to his step as he moved behind his desk, glancing at Dante and saying, "One of my favorite things about this job... that view."

Vinnie tried to lift the corner of his mouth in a small smile. Failed. Sonny wasn't even looking at him anyway. He stuck his hands in his tight jeans pockets and contemplated the wall to his right.

Dante turned to Sonny, all a-glow. "I want to thank you again for this opportunity." It had been five days since Sonny had hired Dante and Dante was still thanking him. Vinnie tried very hard not to allow any sound to come from his mouth...like a hiss...as he exhaled slowly.

"Forget about it," Sonny said. Then, picking up some papers and tossing them back on the desk, Sonny turned fully toward Dante. "Hungry?"

Dante replied casually, "Sure."

"I'm in the mood for Greek. I know a place. I'll call for reservations."

"Stuffed grape leaves are my favorite," Dante quipped.

Sonny picked up the phone, then swiveled, sparing a glance toward Vinnie. "Vinnie? You're coming along?"

"I...I'm kinda tired..." He couldn't believe he'd said that.

Sonny looked at him askance. “Yeah right. Go change. Meet us downstairs in ten.”

Fuming, Vinnie headed for the door. Sonny hadn’t asked him if *he* was hungry. He checked his thoughts again. He was being stupid. Sonny had told him to come. That meant Sonny wanted him to go. That meant that at least Sonny hadn’t forgotten him altogether.

Now came the time for careful choices. He told himself he was not competing. He told himself he was simply dressing for dinner. But when he went to his closet he chose his best suit, the blue silk. And he quickly donned the diamond cufflinks Sonny had given him right after he’d given him Kiki Vanno, dead, with a red ribbon tied around his chest. Vanno was the birthday surprise. The thing Vinnie had asked for over and over. Of course Sonny gave it to him. But the cufflinks were as if to say, *I was thinking about you.*

Adding a gold tie tack, and another gold ring, Vinnie faced the mirror. His hair was a mess. He sprayed the sides the best he could...left the few curling feathers of bangs that wouldn’t stick to the hair on top of his head. He thought they made him look younger anyway. A quick shave and a slap of aftershave, and he was ready to go.

Down in the parking garage Sonny and Dante were waiting for him. Sonny leaned in toward the younger man, said softly, “See? I told you he cleans up nice.”

Vinnie thought, *They were talking about me?* He said nothing and tried not to smirk.

Sonny decided to take the black Lincoln. Dante went automatically to the front driver’s seat and got in. Sonny approached the passenger front door, then turned suddenly to Vinnie. Voice low, almost soft, he said, “Hey. Something wrong?”

Suddenly alarmed at his ridiculous behavior, Vinnie shook his head adamantly. “No. I said I was tired, right?”

Sonny stared at him for a moment, not blinking. Then he said, “Okay,” and got into the front seat.

Vinnie got in the back, trying not to think about the fact that that was where Tony had sat when Vinnie was first hired as a driver and they all went out to eat. He tried very hard not to think about that. Or to think at all. But there was a sour taste in his mouth. And he felt like a complete idiot.

Well, he was a complete idiot. Because none of this was real. Just like Frank had said. None of it. He was damned lucky to be where he was right now, so close to Sonny and his operation. Able to filter valuable information to Frank.

He was betraying Sonny. That was what he was doing. So he had no right to think any of the thoughts he was thinking. No right! In this moment, if anyone here in this car

deserved hatred, animosity, distrust, it was Vinnie himself, not the two guys in the front seat. Because the two guys in the front seat were simply going out to dinner. Vinnie was not 'simply' doing anything. There was nothing *simple* about it. Vinnie was along for the ride, and yes he might order something from the menu, but he was a spy. He was not just going to eat a fine Greek meal complete with probably the most expensive wine on their list. He was also going to catalog everything he heard, and relay any shop-talk to Frank. Vinnie had an agenda.

So he had no right, really, to think anything at all.

But when he stared forward at the back of Sonny's head, the dark brown hair glimmering in the low light of sunset, the animated face was alive and vibrant as he turned to give directions to Dante. The dark eyes sparked gold as he glanced back to Vinnie with a smile; and Vinnie's breath caught.

His heart stepped up a beat. The back of his neck felt suddenly hot.

"You okay back there?" Sonny asked.

Vinnie lifted his fist from his lap, presented him with thumbs up. Then Sonny gave him a friendly wink, and as the car sped up Vinnie felt suddenly as if he was flying.

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Over the next week, Vinnie tried not to compare what Sonny had given him and what Sonny had given Dante. There was no comparison, really. Vinnie got a suite. Dante got a room with no kitchen. Vinnie got a Rolex and silk suits and diamond cufflinks and the dead body of a guy he'd been gunning for. Dante got two suits. Vinnie got a Porsche. Dante borrowed cars when he wanted to go out. Vinnie got the Marine. Dante didn't even get business cards.

So he tried not to compare, but he did it anyway, mentally clamping down on his thoughts, but not quickly enough, before they appeared fully formed in his mind. Realizing his list was longer made him feel somewhat smug...for awhile. And entirely and irrationally stupid.

He'd met with Frank again and Frank had found no dirt on Dante at all. He was squeaky clean. In the organization he was "just a driver." Vinnie knew for a fact that Sonny had not even asked him to courier cash. Dante didn't even carry a gun as far as Vinnie knew. He was hired to keep the cars clean and running and to drive Sonny. That was it.

But Dante was too smart to be satisfied with that for long. And Sonny had to know it. He had a degree in business. He was informed on, it seemed, all subjects. Maybe about the only thing he didn't do was box. But he had said one day within Vinnie's earshot that he'd like it very much if Sonny taught him some basics.

When Dante joined them in the gym for the first time, and Sonny took him under wing and started showing him moves and steps, Vinnie walked away and proceeded to work out alone. He got a good lather going, punching a bag, but it did not stop his errant thoughts of revenge. But revenge for what? Dante had done nothing. Nothing at all but quote a few high-browed philosophers and help Sonny out in every way he could. The cars hummed like kittens and were spotless. His driving was smooth and impeccable.

“Hey, Vinnie!” Sonny called out, interrupting his thoughts. “Want to come over and show him a few moves?”

Vinnie forced a smile and shrugged. “Not really. I was just going to go for a swim.”

“Come on!” Sonny took a few steps toward him.

Behind him, Dante, looking perfect and tan and not yet remotely sweaty in his blue tank and matching shorts, said benignly, “Leave him alone, Sonny. He doesn’t like me.”

Vinnie frowned and, realizing maybe he’d gone too far in showing his true feelings, said, “What?”

Sonny turned to Dante. “What?”

Dante grinned like a summer sunrise and shrugged. “It’s okay. Really.”

“But why would you say that?” Sonny asked slowly. He turned back to Vinnie, looking him up and down this time, eyebrows narrowing.

Now Vinnie shrugged at Sonny and looked at Dante. “I never said anything like that.”

Dante replied, “I know.”

But Vinnie noticed that Sonny, standing between them, suddenly looked entirely depleted. Feeling the silence between the three of them grow more and more awkward, Vinnie said quietly, moving toward his towel, “I’m going for a swim. Anyone want to come?” And walked away without looking back.

The water felt great. Cleansing. Vinnie swam harder and harder until his oxygen depleted brain was deprived of all thought. He felt the water move over and around his body like liquid satin as he drove himself, lap after lap. He didn’t stop. And he didn’t look around at all, only to the side as he stroked, breathed, stroked.

He was vaguely aware, after awhile, that another person had joined him. But he ignored the splashing and kicking in the lane next to him until, finally, muscles and lungs aching, he had to stop. Breathing hard, he clung to the side of the pool, his hand pushing his wet mop of hair back from his forehead. He watched as the other man made his way via crawl-stroke back to Vinnie’s side of the pool, then emerged. Sonny faced him, dripping,

bangs clumped to his forehead, and grabbed the edge with one hand. His lean-muscled, tanned shoulders and arms beaded with water. He matched Vinnie's hard breathing and for a moment they just stared at each other until they calmed.

Sonny's brown eyes flickered with energy and a million thoughts, as always. Now they were focused intently on Vinnie, warmth mixed with mystery, pulling him in. Finally, Sonny looked away, breathed in hard and said, "Is it true?"

Vinnie trailed one hand through the water as if to deflect the question. When he didn't answer, Sonny glanced at him again.

Vinnie said, quickly, "Is what true?"

"Don't play dumb." Now Sonny's palm trailed water and his eyes followed his hand.

The chlorine scent filled Vinnie up. He ducked his head back letting more water fall through his hair. He wanted to swim more. He wanted to swim until he drowned.

"Okay," Sonny said quietly. "So is it that you don't trust him or something?"

Feeling defensive now, Vinnie said, "I never said that. I never said I didn't like him."

Sonny was watching him out the corner of his eye. "He's smart which means he's ambitious," Sonny admitted. "Is that it?"

Vinnie just blinked, feeling water sting his eyes a little. He let go of the pool edge and floated out into his lane.

Sonny said, "Get back here!"

Vinnie righted himself, treading water, watching as Sonny followed him out, matching the distance in his own lane. "I've known this guy since he was six and I was fifteen. He's like the little brother I never had."

"Sure." Vinnie forced a smile and floated a little further out.

"So you make it right with him. Okay?"

Vinnie smiled again, thinking, *Yeah. Sure*, but saying nothing.

"Okay?" Sonny asked again.

Stubborn, Vinnie just nodded and ducked his head back, feeling water slide through his hair like silken fingers. He closed his eyes. He heard a splash, and Sonny hiss, "Christ!" Then hands were on his shoulders and a palm on the top of his head, pushing him under.

Instinctively, he pushed up and away, popping up in seconds, inhaling in shock. Sonny, in Vinnie's lane now, was still holding onto his shoulder but he was grinning at him. He said, "You're infuriating, you know that?"

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Things got a little better after that. Dante was always polite and gracious but never imposing anything more onto Vinnie. And Vinnie never had any private words with Dante. Sonny had said to "make it right" but he didn't say how to do that. Vinnie figured silent tolerance was the best solution.

He got used to seeing Dante most nights at dinner and later out for drinks with Sonny. It seemed Dante didn't have a girlfriend right now. None of them did, but that was the way of it sometimes when you were a workaholic. It was okay, except that Vinnie missed his and Sonny's more private moments, their one on one chats which used to happen nightly before Dante came. He even missed their shared silences.

Simply, he regretted not being with Sonny. Just Sonny and no one else. It was strange, actually. But he had really enjoyed their rapport. He craved it. But there seemed to be no moments alone anymore, no time just to focus on each other.

Vinnie knew it was weird, but he'd liked that focus, that intensity that would flare up between them. None of that was about his job. It was about being friends. He enjoyed Sonny immensely, more, he realized, than any other friend he'd ever had.

The irony did not escape him.

He was supposed to be bringing Sonny down, along with Patrice and whoever else he could flag along the way. He was supposed to be spying. But instead all he wanted to do was hang out with him, learn more about who he really was.

Tonight the hour for dinner had come and gone. Everyone had been too busy to dine out in any full-blown, fancy way. It was late. But Sonny wanted drinks and called for both of them to accompany him.

Both Vinnie and Dante arrived simultaneously to meet Sonny in his office. As usual, Sonny was on the phone, animated and energetic, trying to get some point across. As they entered, he made some gestures that they should sit. Both took seats at opposite ends of the couch.

"Dammit," Sonny was saying, "How could you let it get to that point?"

Vinnie could hear stress in Sonny's voice. That might call for a moody night, which often meant extra drinks and hangovers in the morning. He made a mental note to limit himself. With Sonny it was too easy to over-indulge.

Dante sat very still. He wore his suit trousers and vest, but no tie. Vinnie had opted for jeans because he knew Sonny didn't mind if he didn't "dress" for drinks, and because he was no longer competing.

"Fuck!" came the voice from other side of the office. The phone slammed down.

"Trouble in paradise," Dante murmured, his blue eyes catching the light, teeth flashing beneath his grin.

As Sonny walked over to them, Vinnie said, "Anything I can do?"

Sonny shook his head. "No. Fuck. I gotta go down to the casino. It's a long story but I'll only be delayed an hour at most. You two go ahead to Joe's and I'll join you."

"Wait, Sonny..."

But Sonny held up his hand. He reached into his breast pocket, took out his billfold. He pulled out a stack of hundreds. Placing one hand on Dante's shoulder, he held the money out to Vinnie.

"Go on ahead. I said I'll join you."

Vinnie looked at Sonny's palm cupping Dante's shoulder. Something turned uncomfortably in his stomach.

"Here," Sonny said, thrusting the money closer to Vinnie's face.

Vinnie reached up, took it. It should've all been perfectly fine. He hadn't felt a twinge of jealousy, not once since that day in the gym's pool. And Sonny was trusting him with all the money from his billfold. But still...Vinnie didn't want money. He would've paid money to have Sonny touching *him*.

But there was nothing he could do about it. If Sonny said to go ahead, they must obey. Sonny assured them he would be along as quickly as possible.

In the meantime, Vinnie wondered what the hell he and Dante would do without the buffer of Sonny between them.

Wordlessly, all three entered the elevator. When they got to the casino floor, Vinnie said, "Are you sure there's nothing I can help you with, Sonny?"

Sonny waved him off and stepped out from between the doors. "No. Go on. I'll be there. An hour. No more than that. And hopefully less."

Dante asked Sonny, "Are you going to drive yourself?"

“I’ll catch a cab.”

“That’s not safe,” Vinnie began.

“I’ll bring Eddie.”

Vinnie sighed. That was that. Eddie was muscle, a huge guy Sonny had hired for show mostly. And it was a good show. No one crossed Eddie.

Silently, Vinnie and Dante traveled down two more stories to the garage level. Dante went straight to the Lincoln. Vinnie said nothing about the choice. Sonny would’ve chosen it. No arguments there.

When they got into the car, Dante drove smoothly and efficiently onto the street. After about two minutes the younger man said, quietly, “So Sonny says you went to Fordham?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.”

He said nothing at all about having graduated from Brown. In fact, they did not speak again until they pulled into Joe’s parking lot and Dante said, under his breath and maybe even a little nervous at Vinnie’s standoffishness, “Here we are.”

It was close to nine o’clock and the bar, smelling of smoke and booze, was noisy and busy. But the owner greeted them as if expecting them, and showed them to the best booth. “Sonny joining you tonight?”

“Yeah, he’ll be by,” Dante offered.

Vinnie was busy checking out the place. He made a sweep with his eyes, looking for any familiar faces, memorizing certain details, mentally counting the number of people playing pool against the numbers at the bar glued to a football game on the TV. Vinnie did this automatically. He’d been well-trained to look for anyone who might recognize him from his former life. And he looked for connected guys, too, anyone who might approach without warning. He hated surprises.

The place seemed clean, but his radar was up.

Vinnie ordered a drink, then Dante ordered. Vinnie placed a hundred dollar bill face up on the wooden booth table. The waitress ignored the hundred and said to Dante, “First drink’s on the house, hon.”

Dante’s grin flashed as he said, leaning slightly forward to read her nametag, “Why thank you...Hayley.”

Vinnie sat back narrowing his eyebrows.

The waitress spared Vinnie a quick glance and said, “Oh, you, too. Owner’s orders. Because you’re with Sonny.”

Vinnie just gave her a forced smile and a grunt, then crossed his arms over his chest.

Dante quipped, “Vinnie’s not much for words, but he says ‘thank you’ too.”

Vinnie’s smile dropped. He glared. But Dante ignored him. He and the waitress flirted for a few more seconds before she was called away to take another order.

“You don’t have to do that,” Vinnie said.

“What?” Dante’s brows rose, silken brown wings over wide blue eyes.

“Speak for me.”

Dante shrugged, picked up the hundred dollar bill and flicked it in Vinnie’s direction. “You don’t have to pay for me.”

Vinnie ignored the money fluttering in front of him. “I’m not. It’s Sonny’s money.”

Dante nodded. “I was just being polite. She was a nice girl. She’s probably only getting minimum wage. What does it hurt to be nice?”

Arms still crossed, Vinnie leaned forward. “I’m nice.”

“Yeah,” Dante said sarcastically. “Working for the fucking mob. We’re saints with angels choiring us wherever we go.”

“Yeah, well, people do what they gotta to get by.”

“You’re getting by real nice,” Dante observed. “Sonny didn’t even know you when he hired you. Fordham or not, I know you were fresh from the Pen.”

“Watch yourself,” Vinnie said, tone low. The drinks arrived. He took a long sip trying to avoid Dante’s unaffected, unnerving smile.

“Sonny says you...” Dante started.

Vinnie interrupted. “You guys talk about me?”

Dante sipped his drink. “Sonny talks about you.”

For a second, Vinnie didn't know what to say. Then, "He tell you he beat the shit outta me before he hired me?"

Dante remained unmoved. "He said you let him win."

"Fuck, that's none of your business."

Dante leaned forward a little, glossy brown hair glowing in the low lights. "What is it with you, Vinnie? I don't get it. I know you don't like me, but..."

"What? Why do you keep saying that?"

"Because it's true."

Silent for a moment, Vinnie finally shrugged. After all, it was the truth. "What do you want from me?" He felt defensive, and that was never a good plan.

Dante leaned back looking disappointed. "Nothing. Nothing at all." He glanced around the bar, whistling softly under his breath, waiting. Waiting for Sonny. Without that buffer, they were both utterly lost.

Vinnie felt like a cad, but he also wished he could be anywhere else in the world but here with this guy, with Sonny's "little brother." His throat tightened as he thought those words. He took another gulp of his drink and tried not to glance at his watch. How long did Sonny say he would be?

Dante sighed heavily.

Sometimes Vinnie wondered what Sonny was thinking concerning so many of his decisions. This guy had no street smarts at all. He was young, fresh-faced and barely old enough to be away from his mama. A tenderloin. Sonny needed to surround himself with better guys. Or at least guys who could handle themselves in a bad situation. It made him mad all over again. He felt like he was practically babysitting. And to think Sonny wanted Vinnie to show Dante boxing moves at the gym. Why? Why should he? And yet, he felt guilty about it. He was the good guy. He was supposed to be doing a job to protect guys like Dante.

Still, it wasn't his fault Dante needed to learn a few things. Vinnie had had to prove himself over and over. This guy...this guy just floated along a river of gold as if he didn't have a care in the world. Sonny...well, Sonny loved him that easily. It made Vinnie nuts.

Vinnie pushed at his drink, slid forward and got up. "I'll be back in a minute," he said.

Dante did not reply.

Vinnie headed for the men's room, still keeping an eye on the crowd. Once inside he noted he was alone and stood in front of the mirror. He didn't want to be here. Why had he agreed to come? Sonny might expect him to go out at a moment's notice, but he didn't ever force him. Not unless it was clear he needed protection, or that the outing was more of an escapade than recreation. Then it was Vinnie's job to do what needed to be done to get what Sonny required, to keep Sonny safe.

Vinnie sighed and leaned forward, palms flat on the sink. He felt wrung out, worn out and maybe even a little depressed. What was wrong with him? This was the job. It was part of his work for the OCB, and part of his job description with Sonny. If he wasn't up to it, he should just quit the whole thing lock, stock and barrel.

Strangely, quitting was an idea that sparked something deep and hidden inside him. It felt almost like a piece of ice lodged in his sternum had started to melt. At the thought, all pressure was relieved.

And yet, it was preposterous. He couldn't even begin to imagine how it would be to tell Frank he'd just had it. Frank would ask why and Vinnie would not be able to tell him. Worse, telling Sonny he was quitting seemed unimaginable. Walking out on Sonny... Something inside his chest shook with great discomfort at the thought.

Sonny was his reason for everything now. That was what he would not be able to tell Frank. Now, the thought of betraying Sonny felt like a betrayal of himself. He realized more every day that bringing harm to Sonny fell further and further outside his personal parameters.

Vinnie faced his own reflection. He was caught. Trapped in his own web of deceit. By trying so hard to get Sonny to like him, to trust him, he'd fallen himself for the boyish gangster who seemed to have more heart than any OCB agent Vinnie had ever met.

In the mirror his reflection smirked. "What's the matter with you?" it accused.

In answer, he thought of Sonny smiling at him, winking, hugging him hard when Vinnie had asked for his protection. He thought of Sonny's hand always on his back, or his shoulder. He thought of the day Sonny dunked him in the pool, then just grinned.

More than that, he thought of how Sonny laughed at his every joke, listened intently to him if he had a problem or a solution. He liked how Sonny included him in everything. He often forgot that he was working another job, and focused only on what Sonny was doing, what Sonny needed or wanted. And it was never one-sided. Because Sonny always had perfect timing when he'd say to him, tone low, open, "And what do you want, Vinnie?"

It was all so odd and wonderful. Until Dante came along. And that was why Vinnie did not like Dante. Because Dante got in the way. Dante took Sonny's attention and favor. *And what do you want, Vinnie?*

The answer to Sonny he never gave: *I want you.*

Now he stared at himself in the mirror and saw: tired eyes. A weariness. A sadness that who he was and what he wanted were so very much at odds.

“You’re a fool,” he said out loud to his reflection. “A fucking fool.”

But it was useless to chastise himself. Sonny’s face continued to appear in his thoughts. All the time. At work. In his sleep. Everywhere.

He was old enough, experienced enough to know the symptoms. He couldn’t turn away. He could no longer deny it. He was in love.

As he leaned down and turned on the cold water, the outside door slammed open. Vinnie’s head came up automatically to see who had entered. But before he could assess anything at all, something hit him on the neck from behind.

His body stiffened and he sank to his knees. The blow, although painful, did not debilitate him. It only startled him. He instinctively flipped around, then up and swiveled to face his attacker.

Correction: attackers. There were two. Both big white guys that Vinnie did not recognize. One had a scar down his right cheek and no hair. The other, taller and wider, had long, greasy hair that swung in brown clumps to his shoulders.

Scarface said, “Look, it’s Steelgrave’s right hand.” His head tilted. His right hand held a switchblade, not large but still something that could do a lot of damage. “We thought we recognized you casing the joint.”

Greasy guy said, “What do you think Patrice would pay us for a finger, an ear, or maybe something else from this guy?”

Great, Vinnie thought. *Freelancers*. Freelancers were the worst because they were the stupidest. They always thought they could make some money doing something really really dumb, like starting a mob-war.

Vinnie ground his teeth, then held out his hands. “Fine. You think this is gonna work? Which finger do you want?”

Scarface held up the switchblade just as Vinnie thought he might. He grinned moronically. Vinnie grinned back. Then lunged. He caught the guy’s hand at just the right spot, trying to wrench the knife free. It was a good move. It could’ve worked. But the other was on him from behind and it was annoying as hell, as well interfering with Vinnie’s best moves.

Vinnie fell, again, to his knees. Scarface went with him, still clinging to the knife with both hands now, while greasy guy was trying to get Vinnie in a chokehold. The switchblade flickered silver in the fluorescent bathroom light as it tilted against Vinnie's strength just enough and down to cut deeply into the back of Vinnie's left hand. The sting jolted through him, but Vinnie ignored it, pushing with both hands to keep the knife off him, struggling to get the other guy to loosen his grip. Blood began to flow, red and hot down his wrist, but he ignored that, too, only hoping his grip didn't become slippery and loosen. Then, if he let go, who knew what might happen?

The thought crossed his mind as he grunted and strained that maybe if he did let go of the guy's wrist, things would be better. He would no longer have to worry about Sonny *or* Frank *or* Dante. Everything would just fucking disappear.

He would no longer be a cop. He would no longer be Sonny's "smart guy." And the skirmish in the men's room at Joe's might be talked about for a week or so before being forgotten in the fog of time as nothing worth remembering, nothing of significance in the history of human events.

From behind, greasy guy started to get a pretty good hold, despite Vinnie's attempts at shaking him, while still holding scarface's wrist with one hand, and now reaching out with the other, pushing against his ugly cheek. You'd think with a scar like that the guy would have learned to stay away from knives. But, no, Vinnie wasn't that lucky. Not tonight.

There was a lot of grunting and groaning. Vinnie heard himself hiss, "You fuck! Let go!" He didn't know who he was talking to. Both of them probably.

His fingers scrabbled, trying to get the other guy's eyes while avoiding his teeth. Scarface yelled, pulling back just a little.

The floor was slippery. Their knees slid along it as greasy guy kept shoving, kept trying to get a firm hold on Vinnie about the shoulders, the neck.

Scarface's breath stank like a dumpster. Vinnie felt his grip slide, felt blood wash warm down his arm. He was slowly losing this one. More resigned than pissed, Vinnie thought, *Ah well. Going down like this was not how I pictured it.* He'd hoped for more glory, like taking a flying leap at a moving truck. Or gunshots ratcheting him jerkily into the side of a building.

But these two guys were just...well...the sorriest two murderers he'd ever faced.

His hand slipped more. Greasy guy got his chokehold. Vinnie gasped.

Then suddenly scarface was gone. Vinnie fell back in greasy guy's grip, his hands coming up and grabbing the big forearm. Then the forearm was gone. Kneeling, Vinnie bent forward and looked around. Scarface lay on the floor stunned, not moving. Greasy

guy knelt by the sinks and beside him stood Dante with scarface's switchblade pressed to his neck. Blood was already seeping from the shallow cut the blade made on the big ape's neck.

As Vinnie watched the scene, Dante kicked out and up with his foot, catching greasy guy under the chin. The guy's head hit the sink and he slumped. Dante took up the switchblade, hit the button to sheathe it, and held out a hand to Vinnie saying, "Sonny told me if I ever let anything happen to you he'd kill me."

Vinnie reached with his good arm and took Dante's offered hand. Dante pulled him up. He glanced at the blood on Vinnie's arm. "That doesn't look so good." He grabbed some paper towels and pressed them to the back of Vinnie's hand, then tugged. "Let's get outta here now!"

Without a word, Vinnie followed. Dante cut a graceful line through the oblivious crowd, grabbing Vinnie's leather jacket from their booth as they went, while Vinnie kept his bloody hand low and covered with the towels. Their hasty retreat to the front door went unnoticed. Dante shoved open the doors and they ran head-on, straight into Sonny and Eddie.

Sonny said, "Hey!" stepped back and took them in with one look. "What the fuck?"

"Come on!" Dante urged, grabbing Sonny's jacket sleeve.

Sonny's eyes widened at Vinnie as Dante pulled him forward. Together, the four of them ran to the Lincoln.

As Dante unlocked the doors, Sonny was saying, "I send the two of you out together for only...what...half an hour and you already get into trouble?" Then his eyes went to Vinnie's hand and the wad of now fairly bloody towels Vinnie held.

"What the hell happened to you?" He made a grab for Vinnie's wrist. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Vinnie said.

Sonny opened the back door. "Get in."

Vinnie obeyed, struggling to keep his balance while favoring his hand. He started to sit up, expecting the door to close, but instead Sonny pushed him and got in beside him. Eddie got into the front passenger side.

Dante was already in the driver's seat and the car started up. Sonny slammed the door as they pulled out of the parking lot and onto the street.

"Hey pal," Sonny called out over the seatback. "Turn on the overhead, will ya?"

The light came on and Sonny grabbed Vinnie's wrist again, bringing it toward him.

Vinnie pulled back, his good hand still holding bloody towels. "Don't. You'll get blood all over your suit."

"You let me worry about that." Sonny gave him a lopsided grin. "So how bad is it?" He looked down at the back of Vinnie's seeping hand. "Oh, that's a nice one. Might need a few stitches."

Vinnie grimaced.

"So what the hell happened?"

From the front seat, Dante said, "Colonel Mustard in the drawing room with a candlestick. Or two monkeys with a switchblade in the men's room. Take your pick."

"That'll do it," Sonny replied. "You recognize 'em?"

"Freelancers," Vinnie muttered.

"What did they want?"

"To sell some of my fingers to Patrice."

"So they weren't working for him?"

Vinnie shook his head. "I never saw them before in my life. But they knew me."

"What'd they look like?"

"One guy was bald with a scar on his cheek."

"I think I know that guy," Eddie piped up from the front. "If it's him, Sonny, I can make him wish he was never born."

"Yeah, yeah, later," Sonny said, making a grab for the towels and pressing them tight to Vinnie's hand.

"Ow." Vinnie tried to pull away but Sonny wouldn't let go.

Softly, he said to Vinnie, "Stop it."

"Are we heading for the hospital then?" Dante asked.

Vinnie shook his head, protesting. "I'm all right."

Sonny ignored him. “Take us back to the Diamond. The hotel doc will fix him up faster there, no questions.”

Vinnie sighed heavily.

Sonny said, “So what were you doing, Dante, while Vinnie was getting all cut up?”

Before Dante could reply, Vinnie said, “He kicked their asses.”

Sonny’s eyebrows rose. “Good for you, kid.”

Dante said, “Vinnie had a handle on it. I just helped.”

Vinnie said quietly, “No I didn’t.”

Dante said, “Yeah, well, that’s how I saw it.”

Sonny caught Vinnie’s eye. Vinnie looked down and away. “They had me down on the floor. I don’t think I was getting the upper hand.”

“Yeah, well,” Dante said, “When I saw them go in after you and you didn’t come out in a timely fashion I just thought I’d check on things. No big deal.”

Vinnie shook his head and leaned it back against the soft, cool leather of the back seat.

Sonny still held the towels pressed against the back of his hand, his other hand supporting Vinnie’s wrist and palm.

“Good work, Dante,” Sonny said.

Vinnie felt like an utter failure. He turned his head away from Sonny, opened his eyes and stared out the window at the passing lights and tried to blank his mind.

Then all of a sudden he heard Sonny saying, “Vinnie, come on, buddy. You gotta get up.”

Vinnie jerked, saw they were already in the garage and the door was opening on his side of the car. Dante was there, lending a hand, and Sonny pushed at him from behind. What had happened? Had he passed out? Well, that was just fucking swell. He had failed to keep himself and Dante safe and now he had gone and fainted?

He tried to get out on his own, but dizziness found him reaching for Dante’s hand again.

In the elevator, Vinnie slumped against the back wall. He just felt tired, that was all.

When the elevator got to Dante’s floor, he said to Sonny, “Need me for anything else?”

Sonny shook his head. "I'll deal with this from here."

Dante nodded and handed Sonny Vinnie's black leather jacket. Then he got off and sauntered down the hall toward his room, his hands in his pockets.

Vinnie stared at the floor as the elevator doors closed. They passed Vinnie's floor. "Hey. I just want to go to my room."

"Nah, we're going to my place. It's more comfortable."

"But..." Vinnie knew Sonny rarely let anyone into his penthouse. Vinnie had been there a total of two times, once because Sonny had forgotten something and Vinnie went with him to retrieve it, and the other time was with a couple of other guys to watch a basketball game on Sonny's big-screen TV.

Now Sonny punched in the code for his floor and turned the key. The elevator doors opened onto his lavish living room. The blank TV glowed against one wall. The dark leather couch faced a big, glass coffee table. Large windows showed a light-studded view of downtown Atlantic City.

On the other side of the living room was a bar. Beyond that, Vinnie recalled, was a kitchen decorated in stainless steel and black.

Sonny led Vinnie immediately to an overstuffed comfortable chair.

"Sonny, I'll get blood all over your upholstery."

But Sonny said nothing. He pushed a button and the chair reclined. "Feet up," he said. "You lost some blood there."

Then he moved off down the hall. In seconds, he came back with a stack of towels. He propped Vinnie's injured hand on a couple of folded towels, covering the chair arm, and placed another clean towel over the injury. Then he picked up the phone and called the hotel physician.

Vinnie closed his eyes and tried to relax. He heard the TV come on and channels popping by. The audio settled on what sounded like the final quarter of the same football game that had been showing in Joe's.

He heard Sonny walk back beside his chair and opened his eyes, looking up at him.

"You cold?" Sonny asked, reaching out and touching Vinnie's good hand.

Vinnie shook his head before he realized he was shivering just a little. Sonny left again and came back with a blanket just as a chime rang softly by the elevator. Sonny walked

over to it and coded something into a panel. The elevator doors opened and an older man entered.

“Vinnie, this is Dr. Trevor.”

It was quite quick and efficient. Vinnie was given two shots, one a mild sedative and one a local. The doctor cleaned the cut with antiseptic wipes, then mended the skin with seven neat stitches. Then he wrapped Vinnie’s hand and wrist with a generous amount of gauze and tape, told him to rest for a day and take the antibiotics he left on the coffee table. For most of the time, Vinnie felt well and truly out of it, as if he were wonderfully drunk. He barely noticed when Sonny pulled the blanket up to his chest after it was all done. Then Sonny patted him on the head, his hand lingering for a moment. “You okay? You in pain or anything?” he asked.

Vinnie shook his head woozily. “It’s still numb.”

“You just stay there, then. We can watch the end of the game.”

Vinnie was grateful for that because at the moment he knew he would not be able to walk even the short distance to the elevator to get back to his own suite.

The next thing he knew, Sonny was saying, “Here. Take one of these and drink this.”

Vinnie opened his eyes and took the pill and the glass of orange juice with his good hand and downed it in seconds. He hadn’t realized how parched he was.

Sonny took the empty glass and disappeared again.

Later, Vinnie opened his eyes to see Sonny again leaning over him. “You aren’t going anywhere tonight, pal,” he said as he righted the chair and pulled Vinnie forward. “Come on.”

Vinnie said, “Okay,” although he didn’t understand how come Sonny wanted him to get up if he wasn’t going anywhere. But he obeyed, trying to get his balance and swaying. Sonny had his shoulder under Vinnie’s arm and a tight arm around his waist. It appeared he was leading him down the hall.

Next thing he knew, Sonny was gently pushing him back into a huge, soft white bed where the covers were already turned down. He reached down and took off Vinnie’s shoes, then said, “Lie back.”

Down pillows seemed to absorb his head. He felt Sonny lift one leg, then the other until Vinnie was reclining. Then his hand went to the top button of his jeans.

Vinnie came instantly alert, a strange and painful pang running from his gut to his chest. His hand pushed Sonny’s arm away. “Don’t.”

Sonny sat down beside him, leaned over him and met his eyes. “You don’t got anything I haven’t seen before.”

Vinnie shut his eyes and turned his body partially away. He felt Sonny lean back fully in the bed next to him, then a hand was on his forehead combing back his errant bangs. “Fine. You can sleep in your clothes.”

The hand kept petting him and Vinnie felt almost nauseous. What was Sonny doing? And why wouldn’t he stop?

“You’ve been so surly lately,” Sonny observed. “What am I gonna do with you?”

Vinnie felt his mouth tremble and clamped his lips together tightly. He had to be asleep and dreaming. Sonny just could not be saying these things to him.

“Vinnie?”

Vinnie kept his eyes shut.

Softer, almost seductive, “Hey, Vinnie…”

Vinnie swallowed reflexively but otherwise did not move.

“What do you think I should do to thank Dante, huh?”

Immediately, Vinnie’s eyes snapped open. “What?”

Sonny shook his head, chuckling. “Ah, that got your attention. You always have such a dramatic reaction when I say his name.”

“No I don’t.”

“He’s just a kid, Vinnie.”

“So?”

Sonny blinked and tilted his head, staring at him. “So how should I thank him for saving your ass? You told me yourself that’s what happened.”

Vinnie’s eyes flicked to the ceiling. “I dunno.”

Sonny laughed lightly. “Why do you hate him so much?”

“I don’t.” But as he said the words, his body started to feel uncomfortably tense even in the soft bed and with drugs running through his system.

Seeming not to hear his words, Sonny said, “Is it because you think he’s usurping your place? Is that it?”

“No.”

“Don’t think I’m incapable of noticing things. I saw your reaction in the pool that day, too.”

“What?”

“When I said he was like the little brother I never had.”

“I did *not* react.” Now Vinnie looked at him again. Sonny’s eyes were glowing, soft and hazy. They looked more gold than brown, and they looked so amused and so friendly and so...

Again, Sonny laughed quietly. “Vinnie, surely you know I don’t think of *you* as a little brother.”

“I...I...”

But he didn’t get to finish, because Sonny leaned over him real close this time, hand combing through his hair again, and said, “I’ve never thought of you as a brother. You’re so much more. You always have been.”

This couldn’t be real. He was hallucinating. Sonny could not be saying these things to him. Vinnie shut his eyes again. Sonny’s hand came away from his head and patted his shoulder. Vinnie couldn’t breathe for a moment. He turned his head away. The air came out in a hushed puff.

“It’s okay,” Sonny said cryptically. Then the light went off and he felt Sonny settle next to him. The room was so quiet. He could hear Sonny’s almost silent breathing but that was all. He grasped the edge of the bedspread with his good fist. It seemed like everything was starting to spin, the room, his thoughts...all thoughts of his life beyond these fancy hotel walls. Beyond the realm of Steelgrave. Beyond this soft, white, comfortable bed.

After awhile he realized he must’ve dozed off because when he woke he was momentarily confused. A warmth emanated beside him and he quickly remembered. He’d been injured. He was in Sonny’s penthouse. He was in Sonny’s bed.

His hand ached, then throbbed. Sonny had touched him. Sonny had said things. More than a brother. Always.

Vinnie turned toward the warmth but it was too dark to really see anything but a shape beside him. He yearned to reach out. His whole heart craved a closeness he had never ever dreamed he might want from a man, until he met this one.

Not knowing what else to do, Vinnie turned onto his side and faced the shadowy, still form of his friend. Then he bent his head, feeling his forehead graze the side of Sonny's upper arm. He pressed into that warmth and closed his eyes.

Sonny did not move, but he spoke just above a whisper, "I've been wandering how long it would take you to come to me."

Vinnie pressed his forehead closer to that heat, to the still lingering cologne scent that was so uniquely 'Sonny,' feeling something shudder and then warmly open inside his chest.

Sonny rolled slightly, pressing Vinnie closer, and Vinnie felt the soft knuckles of Sonny's hand graze his temple, cheek and jaw.

"I couldn't...it never occurred to me I'd feel this...this..."

"Shhh." Sonny's lips pressed against his forehead, feathery, intimate, caressing. Vinnie lifted his bandaged hand and rested it against Sonny's chest.

They stayed like that for a long time, Sonny's warm breath against Vinnie's forehead, bodies pressed together, until finally Vinnie slept.

When he woke again he felt so warm and so comfortable. Sonny shifted against him and in the darkness their arms went around each other. Vinnie raised his head. There was no thought. Sonny's lips were simply there, waiting for him. Vinnie's whole body flared up with heat.

Sonny's hand was at the back of Vinnie's neck, pulling him in tighter as their bodies squirmed to be closer, knees bumping, hips meeting. For awhile they stayed that way, kisses growing deeper, fingertips caressing up and down their still-clothed backs. Vinnie felt no pain in his hand now. He rubbed Sonny's back with his fingers, curling them into a fist against the loose, silk shirt Sonny still wore.

After awhile, Sonny pushed Vinnie flat, running one hand back and forth across Vinnie's chest, then down and up under his shirt. The soft palm rubbed at his stomach, sending jittery pangs of longing and arousal throughout his body. Sonny's hand rested on the button to his jeans. He leaned back, ending their kiss, and said, "I wasn't trying to steal your virtue before...well, maybe... but these have gotta go already. They're covered in dried blood."

"Oh." Vinnie tried to lift his head, to move up in the bed, but Sonny pressed him back and his hand started undoing the button, then the zipper.

It was dark. He couldn't see much, but he felt everything. Slowly, Sonny undressed him. He pushed the jeans and shorts down and away and threw them. Vinnie heard them land somewhere across the darkened room. His hand trailed up over Vinnie's bare hip, then up under his t-shirt, gently lifting it over his head.

Naked now, aroused and feeling completely vulnerable, Vinnie inhaled in a hiss through his gritted teeth. Sonny's velvet lips covered his mouth again, turning him on and soothing him at the same time. The other man pulled away with a groan and started squirming out of his own shirt and trousers. Then he was back, climbing between Vinnie's legs, leaning down for a kiss...

Vinnie shut his eyes hard and white lights shot in every direction like rockets as their bodies met, pressed, rubbed. Sonny was all silken heat, soft skin and hard-edged arousal. He grabbed Sonny hard, ignoring the bandages on his left hand. The smooth, muscular back seemed to mold to his touch. His hands strayed lower toward the curve of Sonny's ass. He stroked, then grabbed.

Sonny let out an "ah" as his lips nipped at Vinnie's.

Vinnie arched up, said, "Sonny, I want... I want..."

Sonny interrupted. "I know." His hand pressed the side of Vinnie's face and he leaned down and kissed him for a very long time. Then they rolled onto their sides and Sonny's hands explored, touching Vinnie everywhere. Fingers squirmed between them, teasing Vinnie's balls, then moving up. When Sonny's fingers clasped his cock, Vinnie flopped back in stunned pleasure as Sonny began to stroke him. His moans stuck in his throat, turned into strange little grunts, then what sounded like sobs.

Sonny's lips touched his again and his tongue delved deep. Vinnie opened his mouth and and his heart and started to come hard, reaching up, clutching. Sonny let him pull him down on top of him, chuckling. Vinnie held him tight as his cock continued to jerk, flooding his own stomach and probably Sonny's as well.

Sonny didn't say anything. He just kept kissing him and pressing his own erection into Vinnie's stomach. Vinnie reached between them with his good hand, grasping, moving his palm over Sonny, up and down. The skin was wonderfully satiny smooth, damp. Vinnie had the fleeting thought that this wouldn't be enough, that Sonny, living on the edge, was probably used to much wilder shenanigans to get him off. But Sonny surprised him by gasping twice just as hot liquid sprayed Vinnie's ribs and abdomen.

They stayed embraced and rolled to the other side of the bed. Sonny kept kissing deep, deeper as if nothing had happened, hands all over him again. Vinnie clung to him thinking he never wanted this to end.

They were both so overwhelmed, so intensely into each other, that it wasn't long before arousal peaked again. This time, Sonny's bold mouth left Vinnie's lips for other regions.

Vinnie yelled when he came. It felt like his whole body was coming apart.

Repaying the favor, he teased Sonny so mercilessly with his tongue that Sonny started to curse him. But Vinnie ignored him, having too much fun exploring new textures and tastes to hurry anything along. He loved the smoothness of him. He loved the feel of Sonny's body arching up, Sonny's hands combing through his hair, then gripping tight as Vinnie feather-licked him all the way up the underside of his shaft. He paid special attention to the swollen and stretched head, and Sonny tossed, body rippling, voice rasping, "You're driving me fucking mad." Finally Vinnie sucked down on him, experimenting with different pressures. He would've liked to have experimented longer, but Sonny was cussing again between whimpers, tugging hard at Vinnie's hair, then coming with a growl, furious and fast.

Vinnie moved up and over him, leaning down. "I think I need more practice."

Sonny pulled him to the side, burying his head in Vinnie's chest, still trying to catch his breath. "You can practice on me any time you want."

"Yeah?"

"Fuck yeah."

They rolled together, Sonny's sweat-damp hair cooling against Vinnie's skin. Vinnie lifted the covers over them both as they dozed off.

*

Vinnie moved casually about Sonny's office, looking at everything in such a different light now. It was strange to realize that he was no longer looking for "evidence" even though Frank didn't know that, and Sonny still knew nothing about his other job. But instead he just wanted to look at "the man." He wanted to know everything about him now. Why he might have a particular knick-knack on his shelf, or why he chose to use blue ballpoint pens instead of black.

Sonny had just hung up the phone. Vinnie turned to see he was being watched. But Sonny said nothing, just quirked his mouth in a half-smile. Then he went behind his desk, sat and picked up his mail.

Suddenly Vinnie spied a package. It was narrow and gold and tied with a black ribbon. It was on a shelf against the far wall. "So what's this?"

Sonny swiveled lazily in his chair. "What?"

Vinnie held up the slim package.

“Put that back, that’s not yours.”

Vinnie did as he was told. “Yeah. Okay.”

“And don’t look like that.”

“Like what?”

Sonny didn’t answer.

Vinnie shrugged, putting his hands in his pockets.

Sonny sighed. “It’s for Dante.”

Vinnie felt something startle inside him, but breathed deep to hide the reaction.

A sharp laugh escaped Sonny. “I saw that.”

“What?”

“Your damned reaction again to that name.”

“I didn’t…”

Sonny held up a hand to stop him, swiveled away and got up. He went to his door and locked it. Vinnie watched him, unmoving, as Sonny came over to him. Then suddenly, Vinnie was pinned to the bookshelf. He kept his hands at his sides as Sonny, hands gripping his upper arms, leaned toward him. “You are going to be my undoing.”

“I didn’t *do* anything.”

Sonny ignored his protest. He reached behind Vinnie with one hand and grabbed the package. Then he let go of Vinnie, undoing the ribbon and lifting the lid. Inside was a slim, gold Rolex, lighter than Vinnie’s, the band sporting a soft-textured, non-shiny finish. It was beautiful.

“Nice, isn’t it?” Sonny asked.

Vinnie looked into his eyes. “Sure.”

Sonny clamped his lips together on a smile. “The whole reason we were going out last night for drinks was to celebrate. I just never got a chance to tell you.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah. Dante’s been accepted to Harvard Law.” Now Sonny’s face got more serious. “I really am proud of him. I was going to give him a check, you know, to help him with student expenses, but he got a full scholarship. And two grants. So...”

“He’s leaving?” Vinnie could not help but feel a sense of relief. It must’ve shown, because Sonny eyed him quizzically.

“You’re a bastard, you know that?” Sonny said quietly. Then he leaned in and kissed him. When he was finished, and Vinnie was trying to decide which he needed more, air or the couch, Sonny said, “Maybe *you* should give it to him. As a thank you.”

Slowly, Vinnie shook his head.

Sonny reached up and tousled his bangs. Then he turned and went back to his desk as if nothing had happened. He sat down, putting the lid back on the box and re-tying the ribbon. Then he set it to the side.

Later, there was a knock at the door. Vinnie went to it and unlocked it. Dante entered. That white beguiling smile. Those dimples. The glowing, brown waves of hair. His suit line was perfect, not a wrinkle. He walked like he was wearing marshmallow soled shoes.

Vinnie stood to the side, watching as he approached Sonny’s desk.

“So this is it, then?”

“They’re letting me start right away.”

“You know you have a job here if you ever need it.”

Dante nodded. “I enjoyed getting to know your business. It’s impressive.”

Vinnie noted that Dante’s words were careful. He knew what Sonny was. But he wasn’t like Sonny. Sonny knew that. And suddenly it dawned on Vinnie that was why Sonny had never asked Dante to courier, or do anything else even slightly off-key. Because Dante was clean and Sonny wanted him to stay that way. It was the most peculiar of observations for Vinnie, because he would have expected Sonny to be far more selfish. And yet, Sonny had been solicitous all along to Vinnie, including when he gave him the Marine and told him, “It’s okay. It’s legit.” Why should Vinnie be surprised? Sonny took good care of his people. Vinnie had been getting arrested so much in the beginning that Sonny had backed off and given him other things to do, “legit” things.

Sonny got up and moved around his desk. “I’m really proud.” He reached out and picked up the package. “A parting gift. But promise me this isn’t good bye.”

Dante took the box, undid it. He gave a small gasp when he saw the watch. “My god, Sonny...”

Sonny reached out and hugged him. He turned his head away from Vinnie when he did it. But Vinnie didn't feel anything at the moment but a kind of strange and different sort of affection for Sonny. It was powerful. His heart opened even more, and he wondered what in hell the future would hold for them, or if he could ever face Frank and his old job again.

When Sonny let go of Dante, Vinnie moved forward. “Dante...”

Dante turned.

“I want to say thank you.” He met the warm blue eyes. “And good luck.”

Dante smiled. “Thanks, Vinnie.”

Vinnie held out his right hand, the unbandaged one. Dante took it and they shook like gentlemen.

When Dante let go, he said softly, “You better take good care of him, Vinnie, because if anything happens to him I'll have to come back and kill you.”

Vinnie smiled at the tone. It was light, teasing, but also filled with devotion. Devotion for Sonny. It was the one thing they had in common. “Deal.”

When Dante had gone, Vinnie slowly met Sonny's flickering brown eyes. Sonny said, “Thanks for that.”

“I meant it.”

Sonny nodded. “You did good, Vinnie. You always do.”

Vinnie hoped he was right. Because starting right now, he decided there were going to be a lot of changes in his life.

*

(end)