Call and Return

by PrecariousSauce

Summary

Dante's not sure what he has to offer the girl who has everything, but if she ever needs him, he'll be right there to answer the call.

Evidently, Patty needs him a lot.
Chapter 1

i. “Devil May– Yeah, this is Dante, wh–? Wait, what? Why am I who you’re–?! … I mean, okay, I guess that makes se– Okay, okay, just calm down I’m– Yeah, yeah alright, I’ll be down there in a few minutes… No problem, I guess.”

Dante hangs up the phone, stares at it for a few moments, then looks over to Trish with a puzzled expression; “Apparently I’m one of Patty’s emergency contacts.”

Trish had been spread across the sofa like an 19th Century Odalisque, but with those words she’s up straight as a column; “Something’s happened to Patty?”

Dante shakes his head; “Not exactly. Apparently she’s been suspended from school for fighting with another kid. Her mom’s out of town so they need me to come get her and talk with her vice principal.”

Trish doesn’t even make a token effort to fight the laugh that bubbles up and out of her; “No way! Not our sweet and dignified Lady Patty! You’re a bad influence, Dante.”

“There doesn’t even know who started it and she’s already blaming me,” Dante grumbles, shrugging into his coat and grabbing his keys, “You’re in charge, don’t burn the place down.”

Trish reclines and picks up her magazine; “I make no promises.”

The man who comes strolling into the office a little under fifteen minutes after the call was made looks more like a musician with a casual drug problem than any kind of legal guardian, but when he opens his mouth to ask the secretary where he’s supposed to go there’s no room for doubt. The man’s voice is certainly… distinctive. The Vice Principal, a short balding man with a face that makes one wonder if one of his ancestors was a toad, watches Dante approach through the gaps in the venetian blinds. He shakes his head and clicks his tongue. No wonder Patty’s acting out.

Dante ambles through the office door and completely ignores the Vice Principal in favor of sighing, “Okay, first question Patty-Cake: Did you win?”

Patty has to use her hands to stifle her giggles, but a snort comes bursting out despite her best efforts. Dante ruffles her hair with force enough to wobble her whole head around as he makes his way over to the other chair. He sits down in a fashion that lets the Vice Principal know he’s using every ounce of willpower and decorum in his body to resist propping his feet up on the desk.

Patty puffs out her chest and holds her chin high, replying, “Of course I did! A lady doesn’t start fights, but she does finish them.”

The Vice Principal glares down his nose at them both and clears his throat loudly enough to rattle the blinds; “I will thank the both of you to take this seriously. Mister… Dante, your daughter—”

Dante and Patty’s replies of “He’s not my dad!” and “She’s not my daughter, I’m a family friend” come in perfect harmony.

Dante folds his arms behind his head like a pillow and continues, “Back on topic, what’s the damage? How’s the other kid look?”

The Vice Principal purses his lips with enough force to turn them white and forcefully exhales
through his nose; “Patricia gave the other child a black eye, knocked out one of his teeth, and broke his nose.”

Patty’s smile falls, and as he goes through the inventory of injuries she shrinks lower and lower into her chair.

Dante sits up straighter, eyes flickering to the relatively unscathed Patty; “Jesus, Kid, what’d he do to deserve that?”

The Vice Principal sneers, “The attack was unprovoked and–”

“That’s a lie,” Patty blurts out, flouncing up and out of her chair, “He was talking all sorts of trash about my mom, saying she was loose and no good and–! And he always does, every day at lunch he follows me around with his jerk friends calling me a bastard and–!”

“We do not use that kind of language at this school, Patricia,” the Vice Principal cuts in.

“That’s really what you’re concerned about right now, her saying that kind of shit and not the other kid,” Dante counters, leaning forward in his chair, “If this is what Patty’s getting for fighting back what’s he getting for bullying her?”

The Vice Principal rolls his eyes; “This is the first I’m hearing of any bullying Patricia’s experienced. For the moment, it’s her word against his.”

Dante is quiet for a few moments. His face smooths over into something cold and remote. From the corner of his eye the Vice Principal can see the thermometer on the wall leap up five degrees.

Dante stands up, and when he speaks his voice is smooth and featureless as chrome; “I’ve got more questions. First: Where’s the other kid?”

The Vice Principal blinks a few times; “After receiving medical attention he was sent home, why–?”

Dante starts walking towards the Vice Principal and the temperature leaps up another two degrees; “Second: Before sending the kid home and calling me did you actually sit down and ask him and Patty what happened and why?”

The Vice Principal starts to sweat; “It seemed fairly obvious what happened, any further investigation was deemed unnecessary. I would thank you to st–!”

Dante is looming over him now, drowning him in a shadow far larger than the man himself, and the room is absolutely boiling; “One last thing: Did you send the other kid home because he’s also suspended, or did you send him home because he’s been though enough for one day?”

The Vice Principal just swallows hard and avoids the piercing blue of Dante’s eyes.

Dante leans in and jabs a finger that for a moment he swears looks clawed in the Vice Principal’s face; “I’m going to give you one warning. I hear you’re treating Patty like shit for no reason again, I’m coming for you. Not this school, not the district. You. Get me?”

The Vice Principal nods rapidly.

Dante turns with a sweep of his coat and starts leading Patty towards the door; “Come on, Kiddo. You’re taking a half-day.”

Patty makes a face at him over her shoulder before they’re through the door and out of sight. The
temperature drops, the Vice Principal falls to his knees and fishes his rosary out of his coat with shaking hands. The secretary finds him still praying half an hour later.

The second they clear the front steps of the school there’s a charge that comes sloughing off of Dante, like a burst of static electricity mixed with a wave of heat. Patty watches Dante shake his head and let out a rough sigh. Her feeling of triumph quickly withers.

She gives his coat a little tug to get his attention; “You okay?”

Dante purses his lips in a vain attempt at a smile as he answers through gritted teeth, “It’s good to know the educational system hasn’t changed one bit. I’m fine, Kid, don’t worry about me. We gotta talk about you.”

Patty blanches; “I-I thought you believed me, I–! Why am I in trouble?!”

Dante sighs and gives her hair another rough ruffle, guiding her towards his car; “You’re not in trouble and I do believe you, but we still gotta talk. It’s fine, we’ll do it over sundaes. Let’s go.”

The car ride passes in relative silence, plus or minus Dante’s tape deck struggling to play some song by the Red Hot Chili Peppers (Dante plays them so often their songs kind of blend together in Patty’s mind after a while). They pull up to the usual spot, Cindy greets them with a smile and no questions before rollerskating to the kitchen to get them two sundaes. Patty doesn’t know how Dante can tuck into his so easily. She feels like she’s going to throw up.

After a little while of Patty pushing her strawberry around, Dante remarks with his mouth full, “So is that kid the only one who fucks with you, or are there others?”

Patty frowns at the tabletop and mumbles, “Sometimes I’ll be the flavor of the week for every other jerk who thinks me having a single mom is hilarious, but he’s the one who comes after me every day, and I dunno I just got so sick of sitting there and taking it and… It was never like this at the orphanage…”

“How come you got all the luck with orphanages? All the ones I went to were shit holes full of jackasses who thought it’d be funny to try and dye my hair pink by dumping buckets of pink paint on my head,” Dante shrugs as he scoops up another spoonful, “Definitely better than the foster homes, though, and like half the schools.”

Patty’s jaw drops open; “You got bullied?! No way!”

Dante smirks around his bite; “I wasn’t born a badass demon hunter, Patty-Cake. I was a skinny kid with weird hair and no parents getting knocked around the foster system for like eight years after losing my mom. And the whole ‘healing fast’ thing actually made the whole deal worse, ‘cause all my bullies decided they wanted to figure out how fast I could heal. And when I decided to fight back the administration automatically sided with whoever came running to the office crying about the ‘albino freak’– Familiar story, right?”

Patty’s eyes are wide as lakes; “Whoa… What did you do about it?”

Dante sets his spoon down with a sigh, “I did everything you shouldn’t do. I started acting like a crazy tough guy who did dumb shit like intentionally burning myself with the chemistry equipment and backflipping off the gym roof into the pool because I knew I could survive it and it’d scare off anyone who wasn’t just as crazy. Whenever someone came at me with a challenge I met them head on and ended up putting other kids in the hospital. And shit went down to a minimum at school, but the foster homes were still Hell on Earth, so I dropped out at sixteen and didn’t get my GED until…
like, five years back, I think?”

Patty’s leaning halfway across the table now; “You didn’t graduate high school?! I knew you didn’t go to college but–! Sixteen? You didn’t even go to prom?!”

Dante just raises an eyebrow; “I seem to remember this being a conversation about you?”

Patty immediately wilts; “Yeah… I know… It’s just… If I’m not supposed to do what you did, what am I supposed to do?”

Dante reaches across the table to give her shoulder a squeeze; “You can’t let them see you flinch. They’re not worth it, and you’ve only got so much time on Earth– Lean on your friends, lean on your mom, and don’t give these jackasses the time of day. Worst case scenario… Well, I’m already an emergency contact, apparently. You know the password, you know all the ways into and out of the office, you know where the spare key is. The door’s always open.”

He smiles and wags his chin towards her melting sundae; “Now are you gonna eat that or am I getting a second helping?”

Patty blinks the beads of tears out of her eyes and snatches the sundae away, guarding it like a dragon guards her treasure; “No way! Besides, I wanna hear more about ‘disaffected teen Dante’! You seriously didn’t even stick around for prom?!”

Dante rolls his eyes with a sigh… then replies, “I wasn’t enrolled in the school anymore, but I did go to prom.”

Patty’s laugh is a joyous explosion; “No way! Were there pictures?! Do you have them?! I have to see!”
Chapter 2

Dante arches a brow, leaning on the doorframe; “Remind me why your mom’s not doing this?”

Patty would roll her eyes if they weren’t shut tight so Trish could do her best work; “I told you like twenty times, I love my mom but she doesn’t have half the sense of style Trish does. This is my first dance ever! I wanna make an impression!”

Trish grins as she applies the sparkly eyeshadow; “Don’t you dare take this from me Dante, I haven’t had this much fun doing someone else’s makeup in years.”

Dante rubs at the back of his neck; “Do kids really take middle school dances that seriously now? I only ever went to one and the only way I dressed up was by putting on a button-down shirt.”

Trish snorts, “Dante, that’s how you dress up now.”

Patty sniffs haughtily, turning her head slightly with Trish’s gentle nudging; “It’s not his fault he’s chronically unfashionable. I think it’s genetic.”

Trish shoots a knowing smirk Dante’s way; “Oh I know it is.”

Dante throws his arms out wide as he exclaims, “Hey, show some respect for the dead!”

Trish just laughs, “We can’t ignore the crimes of the dead– Especially not their fashion crimes. Seriously, did your dad actually need that monocle?”

Dante’s about to fire back, but pauses and puts a hand to his chin before he mutters, “I mean, he always said he did, but he also said that if we didn’t eat our vegetables we’d turn to stone so who knows?”

Trish stares at him for a few seconds before turning back to Patty’s makeup with a fond smile; “I think I’m starting to see why you didn’t know anything about his past.”

Dante’s about to ask what that means before there’s a knock at the door. He lopes down the stairs, hands in his pockets, ready to launch into the spiel he always gives solicitors about how he doesn’t want what they’re selling but if they’ve got pest problems (wink wink nudge nudge) he’s happy to give them his business card. He does not find a vacuum cleaner salesman or a Jehovah’s Witness when he opens the door, but instead a skinny twelve year old in an ill-fitting suit staring up at him through cokebottle glasses that make his wide eyes look even wider. A wood-paneled sedan sits running in the alley behind him with a frumpy, affronted-looking middle aged woman in the driver’s seat.

It doesn’t take a genius to put the pieces together.

Dante holds up a hand, “One sec–” then calls over his shoulder, “Yo, Patty! Your date’s here!”

You could hear Patty’s voice from the next street over; “Tell him to wait, I’m almost ready!”

Dante winces and calls back, “Don’t need to, Kid, your voice carries,” before turning back to her very pale suitor, “Yeah, you heard the lady. You can wait inside if you want but from the looks of your mom over there I think she’d call the cops if you got any closer than you are now.”

The kid looks between his mother and Dante before stammering out, “Y-yeah, probably…”

There’s a few moments of silence punctuated by the sputtering and coughing of the sedan’s engine before the kid asks, “Is that a… skull on the wall?”

Dante blinks a few times, then follows the kid’s gaze. Sure enough, he’s got a direct line of sight to one of the demon skulls, a big gnarly one with curled horns and jagged teeth being held up by a bastard sword stabbed half it’s blade-deep in the wall.

Dante, being a profoundly normal person, grins and says, “Oh yeah, that one’s a beauty– Probably my favorite in the whole collection, was a bitch and a half to get but it looks sick up there on the wall, right?”

And the kid, being twelve years old, grins wide and eager; “Yeah, especially with the sword going through the eye to pin it there! Where’d you get those?”

“It’s a side benefit to the job,” Dante replies, crossing his arms over his chest, “I’m pretty much allowed to take anything left over home with me. Hell, some of my work even follows me home, like that one over there,” Dante points to the skull pinned to the dartboard.

The kid’s eyes find a way to go even wider, and he leans in to whisper, “Do you, uh… Do you hunt demons?”

Dante’s grin tilts on an angle; “Depends– You got a pest problem?”

The kid’s jaw drops. The way he’s looking at him, you’d think Dante just told him he was close personal friends with… Fuck, what bands do kids like now? He’s heard Patty mention The Jonas Brothers but he’s got no idea if they’re a band or just… brothers.

Right at that point Patty’s voice chirps from the stairs, “Alright, I’m decent! Let’s go!”

She comes skipping down to the ground floor, resplendent in glitter. The outfit is exactly the sort of thing Trish would wear down to the black and gold color scheme. It has thankfully been adjusted to be appropriate for a twelve year old girl to be wearing in public and paired with a liberal amount of glitter and ruffles, because Patty knows what she likes. Her makeup is dark and dramatic, more appropriate for an artsy ad in a fashion magazine than a school dance.

Dante glances over at her woefully underdressed date. The kid looks like his brain made a mad dash for the border and is deep in the heart of Mexico by now.

Patty twirls around and throws her arms out wide; “What do you think? If you need more time to form an informed opinion Trish took plenty of pictures.”

Dante shakes his head with a smile; “Well, you wanted to make an impression. I’d say you succeeded.”

Patty finally notices her date and skips over, snapping her fingers next to his ears; “Come on, get your head back on your shoulders! We’re gonna be late!”

He blinks once, twice, then shakes himself like a dog and sputters, “R-right! Yeah, uh– Right! Let’s g– We should– Yeah!”

Dante gives them both a lazy salute as Patty drags the kid out the door; “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

Patty sticks her tongue out over her shoulder and shoots back, “That’s not a long list!”
As the two of them scurry to the sedan Dante picks up pieces of their whispered conversation; “Why didn’t you tell me your dad was so cool?” “Ew, he’s not my dad!” “Then who is he?” “That’s a long story…”

Dante watches the sedan stiffly negotiate its way out of the alley, and after it disappears onto the main thoroughfare he asks, “Did you actually take a bunch of pictures?”

He turns to see Trish at his side, a disposable camera in hand and a smile on her face; “Of course I did! Your little girl’s off to her first dance, you gotta preserve these memories!”

Dante rolls his eyes, shutting the door and strolling back inside; “She’s not my little girl, she’s Nina’s.”

Trish ignores him, musing to herself, “We should buy a photo album. These’ll look great next to your prom photos.”
iii. Patty glares across the gear shift; “Dante?”

Dante flinches; “What’s up, Patty-Cake?”

A blonde eyebrow lifts; “Are you afraid?”

Dante laughs through gritted teeth; “What? Why would I be afraid? I fight demons for a living, Kiddo, I’m fine.”

Patty narrows her eyes; “You’re gripping the door handle so hard it’s crumpling.”

Dante does a double take and chokes on a swear, pulling his hand off the ruined handle like it’s white hot.

Patty rolls her eyes and sighs, “Why are you getting so bent out of shape about this? We’re in an empty parking lot, you’re right here, nothing’s gonna happen! And even if something does, you heal crazy fast!”

Dante frowns, leaning back in a stiff pantomime of his usual relaxed posture in the car; “I’m not worried about me, I’m worried about my car.”

Patty throws her head back with a groan, “Oh come on, this is your car! It’ll be hanging with the twinkies and cockroaches when the world ends! I couldn’t do any worse to it than you!”

“Hey, I treat my car like a queen,” Dante fires back.

Patty grins a catlike grin; “Too bad you don’t treat your dates that way!”

Dante rubs at his temples; “Look, do you want to learn how to drive or not?”

“Of course I do! Let’s get this done already!” Patty chirps, bouncing in the driver’s seat.

“Well first you gotta actually start the car.”

Dante glares across the gear shift; “Patricia.”

Patty flinches; “… Yeah?”

Dante’s eyes narrow; “Get out of the car.”

It’s somewhat difficult to do that when the front of said car is wrapped around one of three telephone poles in the entire parking lot, but Patty manages. Dante does help, but once they’re both out he stalks quickly to the other side of the lot and disappears into the phone booth. Patty sinks down to the asphalt. She draws her knees up to her chest. She stares ahead at nothing in particular.

After a few minutes Dante comes skulking back, grumbling under his breath, “Gonna take a while before the tow truck gets here. We get to be alone with our thoughts.”

Dante drops down beside her, not making eye-contact and not saying a word. He’s coiled tight like a spring. He stares into space with the intensity of someone who’s trying to set something on fire with their eyes. Patty truly is alone with her thoughts. Her throat starts to ache. Her eyes start to burn. She
clenches her jaw as tight as she possibly can, presses her lips flat together so they won’t tremble. The pressure builds for two minutes before a tiny sob pops out.

Dante’s entire demeanor changes in the crack of a whip.

He’s suddenly sitting ramrod straight, face filled with more terror than she’s ever seen, and he’s *stammering*; “H-hey, Patty– No, no no no, no there’s no– Look, I’m not– It’s just a car, Patty–”

The floodgates burst open; “It’s *not* just a car that’s the car you drove me in when we first *met* you’ve kept it *so nice* for *seven years* and I wrecked it in *one day* and I *know* you can’t afford to get it fixed so it’s gonna go to the *junkyard* and it’ll get turned into a big cube of scrap metal and all those memories will be *gone* and it’s *all my fault!*”

Dante’s hands hover uselessly around her as he tries to pick out where to respond; “Okay, calm down, I don’t think they even do that whole ‘junkyard cube’ thing anymore– Look, Patty, it’s *not* your fault. I’ve never taught anyone to drive before, I wasn’t up to the job.”

Patty scrubs at her eyes; “Yeah, but who *asked you to? I knew* you’d never done something like this but I just– I just wanted–!”

Dante pauses for a moment before scooting closer and drawing her to his side; “Wanted what?”

Patty shuts her eyes, presses her face into Dante’s shoulder and breathes in the smell of leather; “… I wanted to spend time with you. I feel like I never see you anymore. I’m always so busy with school, and now that Mom has her new *boyfriend* she makes me hang out with *him* and whenever there *is* time you’re always out on a job and… It’s stupid. I’m being stupid.”

Dante chuckles, “Kiddo, I’ve seen your grades. It’s not *possible* for you to be stupid.”

Patty perks up, giggling through tears, “You actually *read* those copies of my report cards?”

“You kidding? Every time they come in Trish and Lady ignore *bills* to read them out loud.” Dante snorts, “They’re in Trish’s photo album, she makes *sure* they’re all in order.”

Patty’s mouth curls into a devilish grin; “Are your *prom photos* in there, too?”

Dante looks away; “I plead the Fifth.”

Patty’s shoulders shake with hiccuping laughter, and Dante ruffles her hair; “You don’t gotta come up with excuses to hang out with us, Patty. The door’s been open since we met and it’s still open now. We’ll make time.”

There’s a rumbling of an engine and the distant honk of a horn. Dante and Patty look up towards the entrance to the parking lot– the tow truck finally made it. Dante stands up and starts closing the distance while Patty does her best to get herself cleaned up.

Once the truck comes to a stop, Dante waves and calls, “Been a while, Mac!”

The burly, bald man at the wheel cracks a grin; “Knew it was only a matter ‘a time. I was expecting you to wreck this thing on the job, though.”

He cranes his neck to get a look at Patty and his grin takes on a knowing edge; “Ah– Say no more. Yep, I remember when I was teaching *my* daughter how to drive,” Dante tries to cut in with the standard ‘I’m just a family friend’ response, but Mac just keeps going, “Lemme tell ya, I never appreciated my business more than I did then, ‘cause I had all kinds ‘a junkers she could cut her teeth
on. Lost count ‘a how many times she crashed before she actually got the hang of it…”

Mac rambles mostly to himself as he hooks up the car, and Dante just smiles over his shoulder at Patty with a hapless shrug.

She just laughs, and doesn’t bother correcting him either.
iv. Dante sets the phone down on the receiver and says, “Well ladies, it’s finally happening: I’m going to college.”

“I’m so proud of you,” Trish deadpans, not looking up from the work she’s doing on Luce and Ombra.

Lady grins a cheeky grin and asks, “Did they give you a scholarship for being mixed-race?”

Dante shoots her a level look; “That joke was bad, and you should feel bad. Besides, it’s more like I’m… mixed-species.”

Trish looks up from her guns with a raised eyebrow; “So wait, why are you going to college?”

“Patty’s got a visit to Capulet City University scheduled for the same weekend we’re taking a job around there,” Dante explains, “But Nina came down with something and can’t take her, so now it’s my job, apparently.”

Lady furrows her brow; “Why can’t Nina’s boyfriend do it?”

Trish leans in as she stage-whispers, “Not in the picture anymore– He cheated. With someone at Patty’s school.”

Lady gasps, grinning with delight; “No way. Student or faculty?”

Dante gags; “I don’t wanna know.”

Trish sticks her tongue out at Dante, then suddenly perks up; “Wait a minute, we’re all gonna be there for that job. Does that mean we can come too?”

Dante arches a brow; “I mean, sure, I guess, but why would you want to? It’s a college, they all look the same.”

Trish rolls her eyes; “How would you know? You’ve never even applied to one.”

“I’ve driven enough succubi and incubi out of enough frat and sorority houses to get a gist,” Dante grouses with a full-body shudder.

Patty Lowell, a bright and cheerful seventeen year old girl with a smart sense of fashion and an entire itemized list of questions written out on a legal pad, is everything her tour guide expected her to be. Her entourage of chaperones is not. They look like a glam rock band whose tour bus broke down outside campus. The white-haired man even has a guitar case slung over one shoulder to complete the look.

Their eyes sweep along the line of people clad in varying amounts of leather; “So you all are Patty’s… guardians?”

Patty points to each of them in order as she replies, “This is Dante, Trish, and Lady. They’re family friends.”

Lady pulls Patty into a friendly headlock, adding, “More like honorary aunts and uncle. Let’s get this tour started– We’re burning daylight!”
The tour guide stares at them for a few more seconds before sighing, “Okay then,” they turn and gesture to the building next door, “So right over here is Longinus Hall, which houses the Communications department—”

Three hands go up and none of them belong to Patty.

Trish speaks up before she can get called on; “What exactly does ‘Communications’ mean? Is that a fancy way to say ‘languages’ or are you literally teaching people to talk? Because I’d be surprised if people got all the way to college without knowing how to speak.”

Lady pushes Trish’s hand down and answers in the guide’s stead, “Nah Trish, Communications is one of those majors for people who don’t know what they wanna do with their lives. It’s basically nothing.”

The tour guide, a Communications major, says nothing.

Dante cuts in, “More importantly why do you have a hall named after Longinus?”

The tour guide winces; “Our founder and the early faculty were all... very religious.”

Dante’s eyebrows lift and he nods, muttering to himself, “No wonder I started feeling itchy after walking through the gate,” without a trace of irony. Trish nods sympathetically before scratching a spot on her back.

The tour proves itself to be, as the guide expected, very long. At Della Vigna Hall Trish traumatizes a pair of frat boys trying to catcall her by threatening them both with a semi-organic sword. At Alighieri Hall Lady and Dante get into a fierce debate over whether or not Catcher in the Rye or The Scarlet Letter were more insufferable to read in high school the second the guide mentions the English department is housed there. Dante and Trish have to wait outside the Constance School of Theology because Dante gets lightheaded when he comes close to the door and Trish has to veer off and vomit in a bush before they get within three yards of the building.

The tour guide tries to ask if Trish and Dante are feeling unwell, and Lady just snickers, “They’ve got allergies.”

Things proceed with the same lack of decorum as they slowly circle out towards the edge of the campus. In between her entourage’s commentary Patty does manage to get through a little over half of her list of questions, but her face seems to fall with every answer no matter how positively the guide tries to spin them. While they’re out at Siger Residence Hall, Dante and Trish both perk up like dogs getting a scent.

Patty rolls her eyes and sighs, “I know that look.”

A grin spreads across Lady’s face; “So do I. Are we on the clock now?”

Dante’s answering grin teeters on the edge of manic; “You know it. Meet us at the car, Patty?”

Surprisingly, she smiles; “I have my license now, if you make me wait longer than an hour I’ll drive off without you.”

With cackling laughter and copious ruffling of hair the three of them are off, blurs of leather and guns being drawn heading out towards the cheap housing and frat compounds just outside campus. The second they disappear, the gunshots start.

The guide looks between Patty and the neighborhood with wide, terrified eyes; “W-what the–?!
What are they doing?!

Patty stares at them for a few seconds before she says, “That depends. What do you think happened during the ’91 Tower Incident, the ’01 Mallet Island Disaster, the ’03 Dumary Island Disaster, or the 2011 Fortuna Disaster?”

The guide slowly blinks; “A bunch of natural disasters and terrorist attacks?”

“Then they’re in pest control,” Patty answers, “Now, we’ve got a lot more tour to get through– What were you saying about student housing?”

After work Dante, Trish, and Lady like to drink at bars by the beach. Mostly because the beach has free outdoor showers where one can wash blood and viscera off their leather clothes, but the patio seating with a view of the ocean doesn’t hurt.

“So yeah, long story short Patty-Cake,” Dante says, pausing to take a swig of his beer, “If you’re gonna go to this school don’t join Xi Upsilon Omega. That house was lousy with Incubi. I think some of them had been there so long they’d started taking classes.”

Lady snorts into her Brandied Ginger, “D’you think they paid their tuition in red orbs?”

Trish nearly spills Wild Cherry Mimosa all over herself as she rocks back in her chair, laughing, “If they did the three of us could pay to send Patty to school for the rest of her life!”

“Don’t worry, I’m definitely not going to join any sorority,” Patty says around a mouthful of wings, “Especially not at this school. Capulet University is off the list.”

“How narrow is that list getting?” Lady asks, turning to give Patty her full attention.

Patty picks at her wings and swirls her Shirley Temple for a long while, then replies, “It’s getting… pretty narrow. The only schools still on there are the ones I haven’t visited.”

Dante, Trish, and Lady share glances, and take some sips in silence. The sound of the nearby ocean and the game on the bar television fill the void. Patty continues to stare at the tabletop with her brows furrowed and lips pursed, swirling her drink around and around.

Dante leans in and asks, voice soft, “Hey, kiddo, between us: Do you actually want to go to college?”

Patty runs her hands through her hair with a big sigh; “I thought I did! I mean I should, right? If I want a good job I have to be on top of this, I have to be applying and researching and– I mean, we can afford it, I have a college fund and with a single mom I’m eligible for a lot of scholarships and all but when I actually get to these campuses and start reading about what it’ll cost and I see what the job market is actually looking like these days I… It all feels like a huge waste of time and money! I don’t want to sit around for four years and get a degree that doesn’t actually make it any easier for me to get a job, I wanna get out there and… and…”

Trish scoots her chair closer to Patty’s, leaning on her elbows and propping her chin on her hands; “And?”

Patty takes a deep breath, straightens up, and says with a glint in her eyes, “I want to help people. I want to protect them and make their lives better. I want… I want to do what you guys do.”

The whole rest of the table erupts in a chorus of ‘Whoa wait–!’s and ‘Hold on Patty–’s and ‘See the
thing about our line of work—’s. Dante and Lady and Trish talk over each other, all three of them split between telling her to do as they say not as they do and scrambling to give her actual practical advice. They end up arguing with each other, telling each other not to encourage her or to support her no matter what she wants. It’s absolute chaos.

Patty collapses into helpless giggling.

Through her laughter she manages to say, “Calm down, calm down! I’m not about to start wearing leather and swinging a huge sword around!”

The three of them finally look back to her, and Trish says through a smile, “I hope not– If there are two blonde bombshells running around in leather with huge swords people might get confused.”

Patty takes some breaths to try and work through the last of the giggles; “But I mean, I do think about the jobs Dante took while I was hanging around his place, and things like the Temen-ni-Gru and Fortuna, and I think that like… There need to be people who protect the normal, everyday people who get caught up in all this kind of stuff, right? During, and also after and even before, like—If people know what could happen they could take steps to keep themselves and their families safe, right? It’s not a super concrete idea just yet, but like, I feel like it could be something, right?”

Lady shrugs; “It is a little vague, that much is true…”

Patty’s shoulders almost sink, but then Dante cuts in, “It’s nothing a Summer internship in Fortuna or around one of our offices wouldn’t fix, right?”

Lady grins wide and bright; “Is this another way of convincing me to put a sidecar on my bike? I’m not doing it. If she does time at my office she’s getting her own bike.”

Trish takes a long swig of her mimosa before drawling, “Race you guys down to the ocean— last one there has to try and run this by Nina.”

Patty, Dante, and Lady all look at each other, then back at Trish… then are all leaping over the waist-high fence around the patio, dashing towards the surf and laughing like fools. Trish stays put, watching them with a fond smile. By the time they all get down to the water they’ve forgotten all about her. They’re playing in the water like the carefree kids they never got to be.

One of the staff comes drifting over, an eyebrow cocked; “Are they really that drunk already?”

Trish shakes her head; “The kid wanted to have some time in the water before the sun went down. Her dad over there can never say no to her, you know how it is.”

They smile and point to Lady; “Is that mom?”

Trish grins; “Nah, we’re her cool gay aunts. Dad’s got her for the weekend, we happened to be in town, she’s gonna be eighteen before you know it– We’re making the most of our time.”

Trish watches them as the sun sets, and pays with her own credit card instead of Dante’s this time.
v. Patty didn’t actually expect Dante to come to her eighteenth birthday party. They’ve had a ritual for the last ten years: She calls him incessantly, he either dances around the issue or refuses right out, and then within the next few days he rolls up unannounced to take her to breakfast and give her whatever cheap but thoughtful present he managed to buy. It’s just the way of things, and Patty does her bratty act while Nina is watching before jumping right back into her birthday bash and wondering what Dante got for her this year.

Dante doesn’t come calling the next morning. This year it’s Morrison, with his hat in one hand and a wrapped box in the other.

Patty’s stomach drops into her shoes and doesn’t come back up in time for breakfast.

“Presently, we’re not sure if he’s alive or dead,” Morrison explains as he picks at his scrambled eggs, “I’ll just say that I’m not making any decisions ’til I see a body, but it might be a while until we know anything, so…” he pushes the box closer to Patty’s side of the table, “Happy Birthday, Honey.”

Patty knows her mother is asking a few more questions about Red Grave City and if they know anything about the spread of the demonic tree, but she doesn’t really hear them. She spends breakfast staring at the box, at the envelope taped to the top with Patty-Cake written in Dante’s clipped handwriting. She doesn’t open it. She holds it close to her chest as they get the check, Morrison gives her a brusque hug goodbye, and drive home.

Her mom turns to her as they come through the front door and asks, “So, do you want to open it now?”

Patty stares at the box for a few more seconds before resolutely shaking her head; “No. I’ll wait until Dante gets back.”

Her mom’s mouth drops open and she starts to speak, then bites her lip, looks away, and after a few more moments murmurs, “Patty, Honey, I know what Dante’s capable of, but with how things are looking in Red Grave City—”

Patty clutches the box even tighter and looks at her mother with steel in her eyes; “I’ll wait until Dante gets back.”

Her mom lasts for a few seconds before breaking eye contact with a sigh; “Okay, we’ll wait.”

Patty marches up the stairs to her room and places the box on top of her dresser. She turns away… then turns back and carefully removes the tape keeping the envelope affixed to the top. She grabs her letter opener (an older gift from Dante) and cleanly cuts it open. Dante’s cards are usually the kind you find in a drugstore, with incredibly bad jokes on the outside and inside. This one is made of very nice cardstock and has a pair of sweet pea flowers painted in watercolor on the front. Patty opens it to find more of Dante’s clean handwriting:

Hey Kid,

Eighteen’s a special birthday so you’re getting a special card. I tried writing a big sappy diatribe in here but you know me, I’m an expert at putting my foot directly in my mouth. The gift itself says more than I ever could.
Happy Birthday, Patty. No matter what happens, I’m always on your side.

– Dante

PS: When you open your present, open it again. You’ll know what I mean.

Patty doesn’t know what he means.

She puts the card in a frame. She volunteers with relief efforts for Red Grave City refugees and goes to Fortuna to help Kyrie pore over intel for Nero and Nico. She keeps her hands and mind busy, and never touches the present even once.

Dante and Vergil descend into Hell at 4:45 PM on June 15th.

Dante and Vergil come back out of Hell at 6:37 PM on June 25th.

Turns out fighting your brother for ten days straight is good catharsis for the first five days, then gets really boring on the sixth when you run out of issues to yell at each other about between strikes. Vergil’s pretty sure the only reason they didn’t leave sooner is because they both had too much pride to be the first one to bend and suggest going home.

There’s a healthy combination of delirious joy and tooth-shattering anger from Dante’s friends when he comes walking through the front door of the Devil May Cry, Vergil slinking along behind him like a frightened cat. Lady slaps the taste out of Dante’s mouth. Trish tries to pretend she isn’t crying so hard she’s ruining her makeup. Nero beats the tar out of Dante and Vergil in full Devil Trigger, nearly destroying a city block, and when he’s done he drags them back so Kyrie can cross her arms over her chest and tell them she’s disappointed in their behavior. Nico mostly acts a hype-woman for them both. A very lovely woman with bright red hair and dark skin appears nearly out of nowhere to sock Dante in the jaw before kissing him.

But between the blows and tongue lashings not one seems to hit Dante as hard as Morrison asking, “So am I telling Patty or are you?”

Dante sucks in a breath through his teeth, shuts his eyes, and mutters, “I’ll go see her.”

Morrison smirks and pats Dante on the shoulder; “For once in your life just say ‘sorry’ like a normal person.”

Dante nods, and as Morrison leaves the room Vergil watches him go before leaning over and whispering, “Who’s Patty?”

Dante opens his mouth, closes it, then turns to Vergil with a grin; “You’ll see.”

Oh. Good. Vergil hates surprises.

A few minutes and a car ride later, Vergil finds himself in front of a pretty little townhouse in a neighborhood that he’s certain is more expensive than it deserves to be. Vergil can feel his hackles rising as he follows Dante up the front steps. Any second now he’s expecting someone to come over and tell them they’re not supposed to be here. Dante knocks three times on the front door before shoving his hands in his pockets and taking a few long, deep breaths.

Vergil frowns and reaches out, tentatively touching Dante’s shoulder; “Are you… nervous?”

Dante chuffs out a breathy laugh; “Let’s just say I really don’t wanna fuck this up.”
The door creaks open. A beautiful middle-aged woman with long blonde hair stands on the other side, and the second she processes exactly who’s standing at her door her blue eyes go wide. Her jaw clenches tight. Dante starts to say something that begins with an “H” but that’s as far as he gets because the woman steps across the threshold and slaps Dante so hard across the face that the whole city can hear it. Vergil’s hand flies up to his mouth to hide the smirk playing across it. Dante glares over his shoulder at him anyway.

The woman cuts Dante off a second time by jabbing a finger in his face and hissing, “She was a wreck for days after learning what happened on that goddamn tree and you think you can just come back here without even calling ahead?!”

Vergil expects a smart remark from Dante that deflects the verbal blow and makes her face turn even redder. He expects the woman to slam the door in their faces and this entire encounter to be over.

Instead, Dante swallows hard and sighs, “Yeah, yeah I’m aware. I’m here to apologize to her… and to you. I’ve put you through a lot, Nina, and I know you don’t want me around because I’m… well, because I’m me. I’m sorry for that.”

Vergil’s eyebrows leap up.

‘Nina’ similarly stares up at him in shock, opening and closing her mouth soundlessly, before she lets her head hang; “It’s… It’s not your fault but it’s…” she slowly looks up at him through her bangs with a sheepish smile, “Would you believe I’m jealous of you?”

Dante’s eyes go wide; “What?”

Nina shakes her head with a soft laugh, “I thought you wouldn’t,” then turns away and calls up the stairs, “Patty! Someone’s here to see you!”

Once again, everything Vergil expects is miles away from what actually comes trotting down the stairs.

The girl is a teenager, on the older end of that spectrum certainly but obviously still growing into some gangly arms and legs. Her long blonde hair and bright blue eyes make Vergil do a double take, but to his senses she reads as entirely human. Her sense of fashion is floral and feminine and has entirely too many ruffles for Vergil’s comfort. When she sees Dante in the doorway she stops dead in her tracks, jaw dropping open. There’s only a moment before she’s bolting across the entryway towards him, and she’s the first and only among Dante’s friends to not hit him. Instead she leaps mid-stride and nearly tackles him in a hug. Dante catches her and pulls her close, rocking her back and forth as she sobs into his shoulder.

Vergil can hear Dante murmuring into her hair softly, “It’s okay, it’s okay, I’m here kiddo, don’t cry,” over and over again.

After a few long moments the girl drops down to her feet, pushing back from Dante so she can glare up at him; “What have I told you about going to Hell?!”

Dante grins and wipes some tears off her ruddy cheeks; “Don’t go without you, I remember. Sorry, Patty-Cake, I didn’t mean to be there so long but I got sidetracked. But if it’s any consolation, I’ve got a surprise!”

Vergil’s stomach drops down into his feet as Dante turns to reveal him.

“Vergil, Patricia Lowell,” Dante says, gesturing between the both of them, “Patty… My brother, Vergil.”
Patty’s eyes go wide enough to let Vergil know she knows exactly who he is. Vergil’s certain his hair and skin are the same color right now. What does he say? What can he say? How did Dante introduce himself to Vergil’s son—?! Oh no, wait, he knows how that happened. Vergil isn’t about to fight this girl so that’s out of the question. This girl lives in a normal house with a mother, Vergil couldn’t relate to her less if he tri–

A dainty hand strikes him hard across the cheek.

Vergil’s instincts take over and he’s nearly drawn Yamato all the way out of her sheathe before he hears Patty snap, “That’s for what you did to Dante! You’re brothers, you were each other’s only family and you pushed him away for no reason! Do you know how upset he’s been this whole time?!

He keeps it bottled up but I’ve seen it! He refused to celebrate his birthday for years because that was also your birthday and it just made him depressed to think about! We had to do math to figure out how old he was because he hadn’t counted in so long! Math, Vergil! Dante’s terrible at math!”

Vergil’s eyes crawl over to where Dante is leaning against the railing, trying to say around a laugh, “Why are you throwing me under the bus?”

She just crosses her arms over her chest and replies, “You let us think you were as good as dead for ten days, this is the least you deserve.”

Vergil can’t help a small smile—she’s definitely not Dante’s, not by blood. She’s too smart.

Vergil gets roped into helping Nina with the dishes, and Dante thinks that’s just another way for Patty to “punish” him for past crimes until she tells Dante to stay put and goes racing up the stairs. She takes them two at a time on the way back down, holding a perfectly wrapped present covered in a fine layer of dust in her arms.

Patty bounces back into the chair next to him and Dante snorts, “Seriously, Kid? Why didn’t you open that when Morrison gave it to you?”

Patty doesn’t even make eye contact as she replies, “Because I wasn’t about to let you say goodbye.”

Dante feels a sharp pain in his throat and a burning at the back of his eyes, but swallows them both. Patty finds the tape and peels it off with meticulous care. She pulls the wrapping paper off as one big, perfectly intact piece, and folds it back up for Dante to reuse. Dante’s pretty sure he’s used that exact same piece of wrapping paper for the last three birthdays in a row. Much as he knew they could leave anytime with Yamato, it still feels a bit surreal knowing that he’s gonna use it again.

Patty lifts the lid of the box, and just as Dante knew she would she bursts out laughing.

“No way! There’s absolutely no way! This is real?!” Patty cackles as she lifts the frame out of the box.

In the frame is a photo of a gangly, seventeen-year-old Dante, wearing a powder blue tuxedo that hasn’t heard of the concept of fitting its wearer and is offended by the idea that it should. His date’s warm brown skin and bright smile just makes Dante look even paler and more awkward by comparison. Her bamboo earrings, dark lipliner, and high half-ponytail are all anyone needs to know that this picture was taken in 1990. Dante’s attempt to slick his hair back made him look like Vergil if Vergil was both incredibly lazy and had never heard of a mirror.

Dante can’t help a fond smile; “Yeah, unfortunately it’s real.”

Patty scoots closer and points to his date; “Who’s this?”
“That’s Raquel, my girlfriend back then,” Dante replies, leaning his cheek on one hand, “She left for college after this so we were kinda already over, but I wanted us to have one ‘last hurrah’, I guess, so… That’s how this crime against fashion happened.”

Patty’s eyebrows disappear behind her bangs; “You were the one who wanted to go to prom?”

Dante nods; “Yup. I had a big cheesy prom-posa with fireworks and everything. ’S a good thing I dropped out before then because I would’ve been expelled for that shit.”

Patty looks between him and Raquel a few times, remarking, “You two look like you really liked each other,” a Cheshire Cat grin spreads across her face and she waggles her eyebrows, “So you wanted a ‘last hurrah’ but did you guys have a last hurrah later that night or–?”

Dante swats at her and she leans away as he gags, “Jesus Christ, you spend too much time with Lady and Trish! When did you get nasty?”

Patty just laughs, “You didn’t say ‘no’!”

Dante shakes his head with a sigh, “You try to be a good influence…”

Suddenly, Patty perks up; “Oh right, your card said to ‘open it again’… I guess that means–”

Dante has to restrain himself from leaping all the way out of his chair as he stammers, “Hey, Kid–Patty– Maybe do that later? That’s–!”

Dante should’ve kept his big mouth shut. Patty’s now flipped the frame over and is opening the back with surgical efficiency. Dante leans away, covering his eyes with his hand. He doesn’t need to see.

He knows exactly what Patty’s looking at, what’s made her fall eerily silent.

Dante knows that hidden on the other side of his prom photos is a government form, half-finished, dated to ten years ago. He knows that there’s signatures she’ll recognize as his and the director of her orphanage on it. He knows that the form got folded up and placed in a drawer the morning after Nina and Patty were reunited and hadn’t seen the light of day until Dante decided to bite his tongue and pull it out.

Patty’s voice comes in a near whisper; “Why?”

Dante’s rambling reply comes in a mumble; “Look, Patty, I got started on that before I even knew your mom was alive and– Yeah the orphanage was fine but it’s not a home, I know that better than anyone, and I mean– I dunno, I don’t think the state would’ve even let me go through with it, but I felt like I had to at least try, right? It was stupid, I was–”

Patty touches his arm and he finally looks over to her as she asks, “I meant why did you only show me these now?”

Dante looks away again; “… You know I’m not good at saying how I feel about people, Patty. I guess I was trying to… show you.”

Patty leans over, the half-finished adoption papers falling to the floor as she pulls Dante into another bear hug.

She whispers in his ear, “I love you too, Dad.”

Well. Even a devil may cry if they hear something like that.
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