

(A sequel to “Happy Birthday.” 3316 words. Wiseguy. Sonny/Vinnie.)

BLUE

by

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Everything looked so blue when Vinnie returned. Everything reminded me of his eyes.

That first day I saw him, after two years of being dead, two years of him thinking I was dead, we spent that whole afternoon and night together. We never got out of bed except for food and drink. We never left each other's side.

He didn't say anything about having to go back to work and I didn't say anything about how long he could stay. In that time we had together, the outside world ceased to exist. The rain slid over my rooftop and down the windows encasing us in a liquid shell. What dim light was left of the day and on into twilight was bluish. The walls of my bedroom took on an azure green. The air was cloying. It felt rich when I breathed in, filling me up. The scent of rivers and unseen gray clouds surrounded us. Night came. Vinnie's breath feathered hot against my neck and jaw. I dozed and dreamt of carpets of violets growing everywhere by the stream in my backyard. Then I dreamt of New York and jukeboxes and sultry love songs and I jerked awake in his arms. He murmured something in my ear. I didn't understand it, but it sounded something like, “I un-banish you.” Then he kissed me and moved over me. My arms went around him tight, as if convinced there was some way I could make him part of me, fuse him to me forever.

I had always wanted Vinnie to want me. But I never dreamed he'd want me this much, as much as I wanted him. He touched me everywhere. He opened me. I could deny him nothing. It wasn't my nature with Vinnie to ever say 'no'. I spread my legs and he burrowed against me. My eyes dotted with blue stings, the pressure on my lids so sweet I couldn't breathe. He pushed my legs back and entered me, pressed up just right stimulating that special place and something inside me burst to life in ecstasy. I came in shock, in surprise, in abject pleasure. He followed, throbbing, bathing me inside with silken heat. I opened my eyes. He was looking down at me and I was swimming in endless blue. He didn't speak. He didn't smile. He bit down hard on his lower lip, then brought his head forward until his cheek was against mine. He stayed inside me. I gripped him harder with my legs. We moved a little, slick, wonderful.

Later, we lay side by side. He idly played with my hand. He took the gold ring off my finger, the one with the blue stone...a blue boulder opal...always my favorite color. He put it on his ring finger, then curled his fist against my shoulder staring at it.

There had been few words between us, but I felt compelled to speak. Tongue heavy, I said, “Keep it.”

He sighed, curled tight against me, and we both slept again.

The morning was as blue gray as a winter sea. When I saw the light, beautiful as it was, I felt a kind of panic. Dreams always end. I wondered how my heart would continue to beat with Vinnie gone, with me alone in my house again, alone in my bed. Something inside me closed off just below my throat, and the icy tinge of it burned there even as Vinnie turned in the bed, moved to embrace me.

I lay very still. I gathered words, thoughts. I said, “You have to go back.”

He kissed my shoulder softly.

“I could go back to jail, maybe even prison. You’ll be fired.”

He moved his lips against the tender skin just above my underarm, then lightly licked. “You taste like rain.”

I reached up, palms flat against his chest and pushed. “Vinnie...”

“You are rain. You’re the rain, the sky, the world.”

“Stop...” I pushed again.

“Don’t...I’m dying...”

“No you’re not.” Now I squirmed out from under him.

He bit me on top of the shoulder as I moved away. Not hard. But I felt it all the way to my toes. “I don’t know what I’ll do,” he whispered, and every part of his face was downturned, the gray morning dimming his eyes.

“You have to go, that’s it.” I moved my legs over the side of the bed.

He wrapped his arms over his chest. He looked away, then, and the energy around him jumped and jagged, aqua, tourmaline, opal.

Without a word he got up and went into the bathroom. I took a deep breath, grabbed my robe and slippers, then went into the kitchen. I started the coffee without really seeing anything. Ten minutes later he came in fully dressed, hair damp and slicked back, and accepted the mug I held out to him.

I made some toast. We sat at my small table, unspeaking. The toast never touched our mouths. We stared at each other for a long time. I got up, put the still full dishes into the sink, then turned, laying my hand on his shoulder. "Come on. You gotta go."

He got up. At the door he started to step out into the mist, into the blue ends of the world that held nothing for either of us anymore, then turned suddenly. He reached out, gripping me hard. He kissed me on each cheek. "For all the wrongs I did..."

I felt the icy sting below my throat, and the still present tickle of the bite on my shoulder. "It's okay." It came out gruff.

I wanted him to promise me he'd be back, to promise everything. I wanted him to tell me I was the only one, the source of all his longings, the core of all his current beliefs. I wanted the deed to his soul.

But I couldn't ask Vinnie for anything.

His fingers touched my chin. Then he moved out into the rain and the fog and the early call of all decent men who live lives of civil meaning, and good grace, and upstanding devotion to the rule of the law, and I lost him again.

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I felt hot all that day despite the chill in the air. I kept running my hands over my hair, tugging at it hard. I had a headache that wouldn't quit.

I forced myself to work long hours at the computer, watching the stock market, tracking my recent trades. I researched new investments, looked for old ones to ditch. I was pretty good at speculating. Over the past year I'd watched my money grow. But that day I called no one. I made no new moves.

I fixed a sandwich I didn't eat.

I poured myself a whiskey and forced it down my throat. Everything inside me burned.

I cleared my desk. Did the laundry. Watched the news. All of it without much awareness, as if I were still half-asleep.

The soft bite on my shoulder had left no mark but my skin itched there. My throat was dry and scratchy. I thought I might have a cold.

Once, I instinctively felt for my opal ring. I had a split-second of panic when I realized it wasn't on my finger until I remembered I'd given it to Vinnie in the middle of the night.

Despite the storm, I thought about going out. Once or twice over the past year I'd gone to a bar looking for company. I ended up with possibilities, and in my younger days

would have gone for them without even thinking twice, but both times I came home alone, not even half-tipsy.

I read somewhere that depression dampens everything. Going out wasn't the cure. Going through the motions of normalcy just pissed me off. I was learning to be a good loner. Such irony, considering my wild past, my old enthusiastic aggression that wouldn't stop. Cock of the Boardwalk? I regretted none of it. But I never dreamed of going back. Never.

In the past year I'd joined a gym and worked out several times a week. But nothing changed for me. Sometimes it made me feel better, sparked my appetite, but only for a little while.

Now I leaned forward, used the remote to turn the TV low. I watched meaningless pictures and listened to the rain beating my roof.

Maybe if I hadn't done that, I wouldn't have heard it. I would have gone on blindly through the night and never known. But that didn't happen. And the knock at the door, soft but compelling, startled my attention.

I got up, opened the door.

He was standing there soaking wet. I thought it couldn't be. I had to have fallen asleep on my couch and was dreaming. The clean scent of raindrops and cold autumn air and a man without an umbrella quickened me. If I was dreaming, I hoped I stayed asleep.

He lifted his hand to touch my arm as he moved to cross the threshold before I could say a word. My boulder opal caught the light and gold and green fire flashed in its depths. He had a wet duffel bag he dropped at my feet. He pulled me to him.

After I pulled back from his kiss, I hissed, "You can't be here!"

He was breathing a little hard. His foot kicked the door closed behind him, shutting off the cold, clean air. He said, shrugging a little and turning to glance over my shoulder, "I want to fight for you."

I thought of jail, prison. I shook my head.

"I'll do whatever it takes."

The cold spot at the bottom of my throat widened. "I can't ask..."

"You don't have to ask," he interrupted, voice slightly clipped.

"My deal is void if I have any contact with you. It's in my terms."

“Fuck the terms.”

I swallowed icy distrust, a coward’s hesitation.

Vinnie said, softer, “I know the system. I’ll get a lawyer.”

“Vinnie, I don’t think you understand.” I moved away from him, toward my couch.

Vinnie followed. “Understand what?”

I frowned, sat. “I’m not that guy anymore. I don’t get what I want anymore. Not ever.”

“What guy is that?” Vinnie questioned, sitting next to me, glancing at the muted TV.
“Sonny Steelgrave? The opportunist? The boss? The wiseguy?”

“I don’t win.” I added in a whisper, “Not anymore.”

“No one has the right to keep us apart.”

I sighed. My head bowed, my eyes closed. “But they do.”

Fingertips skimmed my jaw. “Hey.”

Without opening my eyes, I pushed his hand away.

“Sonny?”

My throat was raw. “That’s not even my name now.”

“Yes it is.”

I leaned slightly away from him but I could feel his heat following me. “Sonny.” His hand was on my shoulder now, right where he’d bitten it early this morning. “You’re Sonny Steelgrave. I’m Vincent Terranova. And I’ve come to take you away from this.”

There were things he said he’d admired about me all those years ago. I never found out what those things were. Now the past me, those old qualities were gone, dead, and he had it all wrong. What we’d been through together, everything that happened seemed like it had happened to two different guys.

I still dreamed it all like it was just yesterday. But it was so long ago.

The rain pounded. My head ached. His hand was on the back of my neck now, lightly moving. “Sonny?”

I didn't budge. I felt him move, get up. Then I felt him kneeling, pressed against my knees. His hands grabbed mine, yanked gently. "Sonny." He squeezed my fingers. "Look at me."

I shook my head.

"Look at me."

My eyelids tensed.

"Look at me!"

I raised my head, lids opening. His clear gaze...it was always too kind for my line of work. I don't know why I never saw it before and realized despite his brawn and smarts he never willingly wanted to play my games. And yet, as I looked at him I saw a flare, a surge of mischief in him. He wasn't some choir boy fresh off the bus from St. Marys. Something inside of me started to warm. The iciness in my throat vanished. My eyebrows rose. Vinnie smiled. It was a little dark, that smile.

I felt my mouth mirror it. And I realized he was right. I hadn't gone away, or died. Seeing him again, looking at his handsome face, I'd fight Hell itself to be with him.

"See?" he said. "It's all there. You just got out of the habit of being you."

I raised my hands to his face, parting the sides of his hair with my fingers. He leaned in, grabbing me. We kissed hard, fell together, mouths locked. He was still wet from the storm. His skin was chilled, flushed. I stood up tugging him with me. "Come on," I said. "Let's get you out of those wet clothes."

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Vinnie gave himself to me unabashedly. With him underneath me I wondered how I could ever have wanted anything else. I couldn't keep my hands off him, my lips. I had him in a terrible frenzy as he thrust against my hand, my mouth, and came. When I entered him he cried out, his gasps tortured.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No!" He clutched at me, moving against me, sending me into a thrilling pleasure realm all my own.

Everything was moist and smooth. He was so perfect, the type of lover I never imagined even in my craziest dreams. I'd always preferred women for bedroom antics. In truth, and sometimes amidst any guy's usual painful denial, I had had fantasies about men. Maybe it was curiosity. Being jaded. Bored, perhaps. But I'd never pursued those distant interests. But Vinnie made it all surface. Vinnie made it all fresh and real beyond

any of my imaginings. It was like I didn't even care that he was a guy...or maybe I did. I liked that he was who he was. I liked his strength, his demeanor; I liked that aggressive air of masculinity in a way I never thought I would. That he was a guy was fine by me. He had a drop-dead perfect body. I loved touching it. I loved touching him. Arousing him. It made me feel powerful and there wasn't ever any question that I was wanted in return. It made me feel secure. Like I was where I was supposed to be.

I felt strangled by this pleasure. I pushed into him. His muscles contracted. He pulled me to him hard and I came gasping against his chest, every color of the spectrum radiating out from my tightly shut eyes.

After, he lay warm against my side. I felt him shudder once, twice. "Okay?" My voice felt tight.

He moved a little, then said, "All this time I thought you were dead."

I lay very still, waiting.

"They didn't have the right..."

"Maybe someday we'll look back on this and have a good laugh."

"Fuck. Sonny, it's...it's evil. To do that to me?"

"Maybe they didn't want to distract your work?" I asked.

"Distract me? What happened...your death...that distracted me more than anything ever has in my life! I was miserable. Maybe if I'd known...if they'd told me I could have dealt with it better." He took a deep breath. "Sonny, for two years I've been a walking mess. I functioned because of my training...only that."

Now I was learning how deep this had gotten into him. The tragedy of us. The horror of what his betrayal did not only to me, but to him. Knowing him, I realized he took the responsibility for my death fully onto himself.

"How dare they do that to me." His whisper became a hiss. The rain had stopped for the moment, and the room was bathed in an eerie kind of dripping silence. The darkness seemed to make everything more real, less distant now. Vinnie was in my arms. Angry, confused, in love. This was no dream.

He smelled of salt. Of the coming winter. And of a kind of loneliness you think you'll never survive.

"What did you do when you left today?" I asked.

I felt his mouth move, but for awhile he didn't answer. Finally, "I drove around. I made phone calls."

"Did you tell anyone about me?"

"No."

"So you didn't go back to your...job?"

"No. I called and said I wouldn't be in. I said I had a personal matter."

"Do you still work with McPike?"

He nodded, his forehead rubbing against me.

"Did you talk to him?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't say anything about me?"

"No. He doesn't know; he wasn't in on it, was he?" Suddenly Vinnie's voice caught. I felt him stiffen.

"No, pal. He wasn't involved in my deal." I reached out, laying my hand against the side of his head.

"I told him I had something I had to do. I needed time." He took a deep breath. "He was pissed because I wouldn't tell him what. He was...concerned."

"Are you guys close?"

Again, he nodded. I stroked his hair.

"Vinnie, what are you thinking of doing?"

"I have no idea."

"You said when you came through my front door that you came back to take me away from all this. It's not impossible, you know. Costa Rica has non-extradition. And I got money."

His head lifted a little. "You do? I thought they would have taken it all..."

I felt myself smile in the dark. "Not all of it."

“How much?”

“Enough.”

“Christ.”

“But Vinnie, I don’t think you’re thinking clearly.” For that matter, was I? “Leaving everything behind, everything you love. I have nothing, but you...you have a life.”

“Did you know Pete died?”

Stunned for a moment, I felt my lungs catch. “No. Vinnie...damn, I’m sorry.”

“That first year after...you died, he was murdered.”

I closed my eyes. *Jesus!* I leaned forward, pressing myself closer to him.

He continued. “My mom is remarried. The only person who might even miss me is Frank.”

“You never met anyone...anyone else?”

He sighed heavily. “I had a girlfriend. It didn’t last.”

“Yeah?” I had to think about that, hard as it was. The question wasn’t about the girl, but about what he said, about it not lasting. “And if we go away, change everything, what happens when this...this...doesn’t last?” I swallowed hard. I pressed his back hard with my open palms. “What happens when this intensity fades...?”

He lifted his head suddenly. There was enough light that I could see his features dimly. Suddenly he smiled, and his voice took on an almost laugh. “This is gonna fade?”

I chuckled once.

“It hasn’t for more than two years,” he said.

“But the intensity, Vinnie...”

He interrupted. “But anything we do together is intense, Sonny. It always was. If you decide you don’t wanna fuck me anymore, we can still have fantastic dinners together, right?”

We laughed in tandem. That was by itself incredible.

Then in a more serious tone, “Sonny, we have a history. We *know* each other. We didn’t just jump into this. It was a long time coming.”

“Ya think?”

“I know.”

We lay silent for a long time. Then I said, “But I can’t really imagine it.”

Softly, “What?”

“Not wanting to fuck you anymore.”

Vinnie burst into more chuckles. I kissed him hard to shut him up. When I let up, he said, “We could really do this.” It was not a question. His warm breath on my face, his arms around me, his body hard and real and firm surrounding me. He was my favorite taste. My favorite color. My favorite fantasy.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Yeah, we could.”

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(end)