

BLIND MOON ALLEY

ALSO BY JOHN FLORIO

Sugar Pop Moon

A Jersey Leo Novel

BLIND MOON ALLEY

John Florio



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For the outsiders

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CHAPTER 1

Newspapers create heroes. Six months ago, they created me. On Christmas, the *Inquirer* turned me—a twenty-four-year-old albino with chalk-white skin, kinky yellow hair, and fluttering green eyes—into the toast of Philadelphia. It took all of eight words to undo a lifetime of insults. *Son of Former Boxing Champ Saves Kidnapped Boy*. That headline, along with two columns of ink and a three-inch shot of my glorious mug, filled the upper-right corner of the broadsheet, pushing Aaron Garvey's date with the electric chair down below the fold. It was a snowy morning, but every newsboy in the city had that paper hoisted over his head. Now it hangs on the wall behind me as I work the bar at a speakeasy the locals call the Ink Well.

I'm Jersey Leo, a genetic milkshake with one too many scoops of vanilla, a piano keyboard with no sharps or flats, a punch line to an inside joke that I've never been in on. Despite what you might have read in the *Inquirer*, I'm no hero, at least not the kind you want your children to be. Ask any one of the cops who've come to me for a spiked beer or a stuffed envelope; he'll tell you I'm breaking the law every time I fill their glasses. No, I'm not out to rid our streets of crime and corruption. All I want to do is pour some moon, make a little dough, and if the stars align, spend a bit of time with a certain five-foot-two-inch coat checker whose eyes haven't seen enough of the real world to stop sparkling. The only reason I made the front page was because I found myself standing at the wrong end of a gun barrel and made sure it wouldn't happen again—to me or anybody like me.

A trail of blue cigarette smoke snakes its way over the bar as the radio plays “Little White Lies.” Aside from those little lies and this bleached bartender, there’s nothing else white in the place. The Ink Well is a colored joint, a tiny hole tucked away in the narrow basement of a nondescript brownstone on Juniper and Vine. It’s an easy target for the uniformed bulls of the sixth precinct—at least a half-dozen of them show up every week to drink our booze and take our cash. The good news is that the Feds don’t even know it’s here. You’ve got to go around the building’s main entrance and down five stone steps just to find the front door. Once you’re inside, the place is no bigger than a tenement flat. The front room fits only three candlelit iron tables. Pass through it and you’ll reach four booths sitting opposite a polished oak bar that runs along the brick wall in the back. Find the bar and you’ll find me.

I like the place for the same reason as the folks who come here. The Ink Well is cozy and dark; the kind of joint that softens the edges of a hardened city. Just walking through the door helps me forget the bread lines that are waiting around the corner. There aren’t many places an albino can call home. This is one.

Tonight, chattering voices and clinking glasses fill the air that’s normally as quiet as the bell on the owner Doolie’s cash register. Doolie can thank Homer, a longshoreman I met two years ago while I was hijacking rum at the Philly Navy Yard for my boss back in New York. Homer’s no Einstein—the cops call him a retard—but he’s popular enough to convince eight of his friends from the dock to join him for a drink in the middle of a hundred-degree heat wave.

He’s standing at his usual place at the back end of the bar, talking with a barrel-chested old-timer with two chins, a round gut, and bags the size of chestnuts under his eyes. I recognize the lug as Doolie’s childhood friend, a factory worker named Calvin I met here a couple of weeks ago.

I empty what's left of the bourbon into Homer's glass, but I leave his and Calvin's money on the bar, untouched. Homer's a day laborer; Calvin lost his job at Baldwin Locomotive about a month back. I just can't see taking the last of their dough.

"He done it for sure. He let that cop bleed," Homer is saying, no doubt referring to Aaron Garvey. Beads of sweat roll down his angular forehead as he speaks. "Man had a right to do it. Took guts, it did."

Homer usually swings his head up and points his puffy eyes at the ceiling when he speaks, but when he mentions Garvey, he looks down at his shoes. His sloped shoulders seem to drop even lower and his long neck seems to bend like clay. He slowly shakes his head.

"They gonna fry 'im for sure," he says, his right hand in his pants pocket and his left holding his bourbon. "Yes sir, they gonna fry 'im. Damn shame."

Homer is right—Garvey has no hope with Governor Pinchot—but he's the only one in Philly who seems to care. Everybody else still remembers what happened three years ago at the Red Canary. Garvey took down a bull—he put a slug in the cop's brainstem and then refused to testify at his own trial. Most of the locals would pull the lever themselves.

Me, I was tight with Garvey in grade school and still can't get used to the idea that my childhood buddy is a cold-blooded killer.

"I knew Garvey growing up in Hoboken," I say but let it rest. If I tell Homer that Garvey was my only friend back then, I'll have to talk about how many times he took beatings for me, how many times he fought off the teachers who'd whip my pale ass just to watch it turn red. Garvey didn't speak about it then, and I'm not about to bring it up now.

"Used to be a good Joe," is all I say.

Calvin hoists his glass and takes a slug. He's either drinking to Garvey, good Joes, or free booze.

Homer wants to hear more about Garvey—the look on his thin, creased face is that of a kid about to meet Jack Dempsey. But I'm going to disappoint him.

"I haven't seen him since the sixth grade," I say, shrugging it off.

"Those bulls done pushed him, they did," Homer says, his eyes rolling back to their usual upward position. "You'd a done the same."

As I toss the empty bourbon bottle into the trash, I spot Angela greeting a regular named Wallace. She takes his hat and hangs it up. I picture myself following her into the coatroom, my hair slicked back, as straight and shiny as John Gilbert's, my skin as clear and smooth as Valentino's. I imagine us sitting at Monte's on Broad Street. Her hair's done up and her nails are painted. I'm wearing my Sunday best. We share a salad. We sip tea and tell stories about growing up; we tell each other what scares us in the dark. We keep on talking as they sweep the floors around us.

Doolie's in the kitchen and yells to me that he needs a fresh bottle of brandy. I've only got a couple of fingers' worth up here, so I lift the mat behind the bar, open the trapdoor, and make my way down the spiral staircase into the sub-basement. I step into the familiar scent of moist dirt as I pull the chain on the light that hangs from the ceiling. The room is cool and dank. Beer kegs line the stone wall on my left. Eighty cases of whiskey and moon are stacked across from them, blocking the hatch that leads out to the dirt road Doolie calls Blind Moon Alley. As far as I know, the only time that alley is used is when the Ink Well gets a delivery. I've got to admit it's a pretty good setup.

I open a case of brandy, grab a bottle, and head back upstairs. When my head emerges from behind the bar, I see Doolie and Angela in front of the kitchen, staring at me. A group of silver-haired Joes across from them are drinking martinis and laughing

as they sing “Walking My Baby Back Home,” but my friends’ faces tell me we’ve got trouble.

Doolie’s eyes are wide open as he nods toward the phone booth next to the kitchen. The receiver is dangling on its wire.

I walk over to him and he whispers to me.

“State pen,” he says.

“For who?” I ask.

When he doesn’t say anything, I have my answer.

I can’t blame him for being worried; the only legal thing we’ve served tonight is a martini olive. But I’ve been around a while and I’ve never heard of a warden arresting anybody. Then again, I’ve also never heard of a prison warden calling a speakeasy. I step into the phone booth, grab the receiver, and slide the door shut.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Leo?” the operator asks.

“Depends who’s calling.”

“One moment, please.”

There’s a clicking sound as the call is patched through and I hear a man’s voice. It’s raspy and weak.

“Hiya, Snowball,” he says.

I was hoping I’d heard the last of that name once I left New York; it only reminds me of what I am outside of Philly. My father always said that some things can’t be shaken.

“Snowball?” he asks again.

This time it hits me who’s on the other end.

“Garv?” I say. The phone booth is stifling, but I’m not about to open it now.

“Damn, it’s good to hear your voice,” he says. “What you doin’ in Philly? Saw your picture. Fuckin’ hero.”

I have no idea how he got his hands on the *Inquirer*, but at least that explains how he knew I was in Philly. He must have spent the past six months tracking me down until somebody gave

him this number. Not an easy task, considering the location of his office.

“Don’t believe everything you read,” I tell him, surprised at how easily we’re falling into our old rhythm after twelve years.

“Bullshit,” he says. His voice is cracking and I wish I could pour him a beer. Then he says: “Y’know, they’re fryin’ me in a couple of days.”

I tell him that I heard about it on the radio.

“Asked me what I want for my last meal,” he says. “As if it’s a fancy occasion, right? Just like a regular restaurant, except the chair at the head of the table has fuckin’ cables attached to it. I told them to go screw their mothers.”

There’s nothing to say, so I stay quiet. Before he says anything else, the call clicks back to the operator. She tells me to report to Eastern State Penitentiary, Tuesday night, seven o’clock.

I’m not following and I tell her so.

“Mr. Garvey’s last meal,” she says. “He’s allowed one guest, and he’s requested you.”

The tone in her voice says she assumes any friend of Aaron Garvey’s is a criminal. I’d feel better about myself if she were wrong.

She spills a bunch of details and I jot them down on the back of Doolie’s yellow pages.

I wipe my sweat from the receiver with my shirtsleeve, hang up the phone, and step out of the booth. The older guys are still singing in the corner. I tell Doolie and Angela that everything’s fine, then take my place behind the bar and splash some bourbon over ice for Homer. I don’t mention that I’ll be meeting my old friend Aaron Garvey just in time to watch him die.

I put a smile on my face and rinse a batch of highball glasses. I’m trying to wash Garvey off my mind, but I can’t stop wondering why, if the guy could share his last meal with one person, he picked me.