

Chapter 1

Brooklyn Blues

Heaven is a place that only exists in the wildest of mortal fantasies. It is an epoch created by the mind to convince us that spending an eternity on its hillsides is a blessing, earned by a job well done in the board game of life. There is no disputing its pull on us. The Almighty himself could not craft a more desirable oasis. When the time comes, past indiscretions are heavily viewed with retrospect. The weight of those decisions is forever haunting when meeting the decider of fate.

When I envision heaven, I imagine all the trimmings of the most glorious beaches and island hideaways. Palm trees shivering above succulent, crisp green grass perfectly mowed at its bases blanket an endless shoreline with surf so crystal blue it sparkles like diamonds underneath a high rising sun. My heart's most precious desires appear right before my eyes with just a whisper within my mind. The juiciest fruits arrive at my feet. The freshest vegetables grow ripe for the picking on stalks that rise on command. The day ends with breathtaking views of blood orange and pink twilight, seamlessly transitioning into starry skies that light up the night like a light bright board. There is no line on the horizon to meet the eye distinguishing where such a world ends, and the next one begins.

And it is without question a place I will forever be expelled from.

I lay awake in the middle of the night on my silk sheets pondering the life I have lived, and what awaits me when it's all said and done. I have committed many wrongdoings to countless folk, some offenses more unscrupulous than others. It had not occurred to me until now I was capable of such adamant behavior. I always seem to leave a peevish taste in people's mouths, no matter how carefully I choose my words or take decisive action to derive the contrary. And believe me, I have left plenty in other people's mouths.

But I shall leave that for later. In hindsight, I lived in the moment and rarely looked back. Those sporadic peeks into the past always divulge my adept failures of what a man is supposed to be. I could never subjugate those resolute thoughts. Their omnipotence forever kept me from escaping a precocious mindset. When a man sees his end in sight, it is only natural to search back to the start to discover who he really is. That end is right around the corner for me. I was informed just a few hours ago, over dinner.

A few weeks ago, I went to see my physician at his private practice for a routine physical. The office setting gets more commodious every time

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I go. Old anatomy magazines and prescription pamphlets are stacked on the coffee tables. Uncomfortable metal legged chairs are arranged in a neat square posted against marshmallow white walls. An old box television hangs on for dear life to its wall mount, playing the same life-altering experiences tape from decades ago on repeat. A new mother cradles her screaming toddler on her knee, ferociously attempting to calm him by shoving a binky in his mouth. It was a blatant scene to sit an hour in.

Finally summoned into Exam Room Three, I plopped on the cushioned exam table. I allowed my hands to massage the tawdry paper sanctioned for sanitary measures. All it does is crack and crumble and is more of a nuisance than anything else. I allowed the personable nurse to take my blood pressure, measure my height and weight, and test my senses. She scribbled a few notes down in the chart labeled Aaron Pence and kindly informed me the doctor would be in shortly. I stared at the beautiful curve of her backside as she shut the door behind her.

A mirror rested on the wall opposite me. I don't know why it was there. I avoid mirrors at all costs. I haven't been one to keep up with physical appearance. I decided to take a good look at myself for the first time in a while, just to see what I was working with.

A couple days' worth of stubble had grown along my jawline. My head had a disheveled look with my natural parting brown hair looking like I had just gotten out of bed. I am a thin, average height guy, but that isn't due to physical fitness or healthy eating. I appear like I drink too much.

My eyes are probably my best attribute. The one description that forever stuck with me is, "an intense, beautiful shade of gold. It's not something you notice at first, but when I do make eye contact with you, it's hard to look away. They always look like you're saying something meaningful, or significant, but most of all, they just look sad and filled with sorrow, which could be the reason that leads to all the others." I am sure a guess can be ventured why I would so vividly remember such words, and who spoke them. She was the be all, end all. The keeper of my keys. The method to my madness.

Dr. Thomas Maglino entered the exam room. He is an old buddy from my college days. We met during a pickup basketball game inside The Prairie during his sophomore campaign at Fordham University. I was at LIU-Brooklyn at the time doing my undergrad. We went bucket for bucket until he hit the game winner. We complemented one another while taking turns quenching our thirst at the water fountain. We arranged a hangout the following weekend.

The hangout ended up being two weekends later at a dance party in a studio apartment in Brooklyn. I met his girlfriend Diane as the drinks flowed. The two of them have been together ever since, sporting the college sweetheart's song and dance. They have two beautiful daughters Michelle

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and Sarah, who are three years apart and currently in college. Tommy says two girls are more than enough to satisfy his desire for children. They are sweet girls. I envy him for holding onto the love of his life.

He didn't leave me waiting too long and paraded his apologies for the wait time. We chatted before diving into my physical. Catching up on the glory days of our alma maters, the times battling on the court, and the current state of our universities seem to be what we discuss. I am always living in the past, so I don't mind the monotonous routine. The economy with a touch of politics followed, neither of which I give a damn about. He mentioned events regarding Congress while overlooking the nurse's notes.

Seeming concerned about what he read, he went into full doctor mode and asked me a series of questions. They seemed pragmatic at first, mostly about my current physical feelings. I had been morose lately, more so than usual. He takes another check of my eyes for himself, discovering the recent development of my sight being blurry was cause for concern. He ordered a series of MRI and brain scans he needed to concur with a specialist on before providing any insight. It is probably nothing, he told me, but with an old friend, he didn't want to take any chances. We agreed to discuss the findings of the tests over drinks and steaks.

I went for the tests that same week. I received Tommy's phone call a week or so after that. I let him pick the place. He decided on this lovely joint Finn's that serves the best meats and pints in Brooklyn. The choice suited me for its proximity to my apartment.

That night was tonight. It was a fair and cool late autumn evening. I opted to walk the six or so blocks to meet him. For a good while we ate and drank, laughed jovially and ordered rounds of the house pale ale. I was thoroughly enjoying myself, basking in the ingeniousness of what companionship once brought for me. I have not had much of it and it made me forget the pretense for our meeting.

We reached an awkward silence after a stretch of hysterical laughter, at which point Tommy took the initiative to break the spirit of the boy's night out. He reminded me why we were out together. After consulting with two separate neurosurgeons on my MRI and brain scan results, he disclosed I have an inoperable tumor wrapped around my optic nerve just behind my eyeball. Both neurosurgeons had concurred with the diagnosis. They differed on how long I could live. Tommy aligned their estimates and said I had six months, a year if I was lucky.

Talk about putting a damper on a nice evening.

I pretended to act shocked. I then played the 'why me?' card. Realistically, it was not capricious at all. I have come to terms and reached the internal conclusion it is well deserved. I don't know how I've been spared this long. At least I didn't have to cover the tab. Getting served a

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death sentence over a porterhouse was excuse enough to never reach for my wallet.

After Tommy and I said farewell, I wandered over to the bar area. I ordered a refill of the pale ale and drained the glass in one chug once the bartender placed it on the coaster. He refilled it without instruction. I left him a generous tip.

I took a deep breath to get my bearings and found a seat at the end of the horseshoe-shaped bar. I allowed my eyes to wander, scanning the crowd for a pick-me-up. In my book, this constitutes one course of action, even though it ends with feeling even more hollow. I immediately rule out the two older broads taking shots across the way. Under different circumstances, I would have ignored the reinforcements of a wingman, but I was more vulnerable than perhaps ever before in those precious moments after hearing my diagnosis. It made me even more reckless, something I didn't think was possible. I ended up settling for a casual bullshit with the bartender as I caught the glances of the group. It is always better to let one approach. It gives me the upper hand.

Soon after, one did. She walked towards the bathroom with one of her friends. I gave the girl that had been eyeing me a look as she passed by, a cross between a disheveled and sad puppy face, yet also looking smooth and casual. It never crosses the border of appearing desperate or pathetic. It works. She took up the stool next to mine after the conclusion of her short lavatory endeavor.

She had a short black cocktail dress on over a tight, lightly tanned body. The tan seemed real even though it was fading. I figured it was the last remnants of a recent excursion in the sun. I thought she had returned from a trip to the islands. Aruba maybe. I never got to ask.

Her strawberry blonde hair was straightened, dangling just off her shoulders. She had one of those faces that just suckers me in, with high cheek bones and olive-green eyes. Her cleavage suggested large breasts. A real pair too, nothing artificial about them. I am a fan of rather robust, au natural sets. Implanted silicon bags don't do it for me. There isn't enough give when palming or giving them a nice squeeze. I have been told I am not up with the times, to which I respond, the hands want what they want.

I want to throw a little clarification in before I continue. By now there is probably an assumption brewing that I am some sexist pig with no respect whatsoever for the finer sex. All I am simply interested in is their looks, participating in the chase just for the slaughter. That I use the term broad to degrade women. That is so far from the truth. I am an avid advocate of women. I love women, and I respect the intricacies contested amongst the sexes. There is not a single woman I have been with I haven't fallen for to some degree, whether it was a quickie in the coat room, or amid a 15-year relationship.

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I just became my father's son, against all hearty attempts to be the opposite of that prick. I grew up hearing and speaking the term broad and somewhere along the way it stuck. I don't use it in the same context he did. I use it in an altered perspective to spite him. It is not a slur to put a woman down. Its intentions are to speak highly. I would never loosely use such a term. The word is just a word and should be left at that.

I have been deemed a womanizer by most. I prefer that label in comparison to the many man whore, dirt bag, or the always classic, asshole names I have been called. Referring to me as a womanizer is more of a compliment than an insult. That is how I take it anyway. It is a gift I developed at a young age. Some of it is genetics, having grown up with the father I had. I also have two older sisters. When those sources are combined, it allotted me boatloads of practice and intel.

Don't let that be twisted though. Just because I live and delve into a certain lifestyle does not mean it is my preference. I was a one-woman man once. Along with everything meaningful in my journey of life, I fucked that package up. It is one loss I never recovered from.

Back in the pub, I was staring deeply into this broad's eyes, pondering what fascinations lurked below the surface. I let her jumpstart the conversation. I almost never initiate. She did approach me after all.

"A man with your looks is the type that shouldn't be drinking alone," she said.

A backhanded compliment through a negative connotation is never a bad jumping point. I feed off such enthusiasm. Her voice was sweet. It sounded young. I was probably old enough to be her father.

"Who should a man like me be drinking with then?" I countered.

A typical forehand crosscourt to keep the volley going. It is easily returnable to keep the ball in play. Questions keep broads intrigued. It keeps them talking. I have met many that felt their voices were never heard. Giving them the opportunity to voice their emotions and listening goes far.

She took the opportunity to lean in close to counteract the static of the rushing patrons all around us. "Probably a girl like me would suffice," she whispered in my ear.

She spoke well for her age. A college student was my guess. Either a junior or senior. She was probably graduating after the spring semester.

I said, "I would have to agree with you."

She reminded me of a steaming hot cup of java in the morning, with milk and two sugars. The type of beverage that gives me a jolt to smash out ten pages of great writing but makes me fade in the two o'clock hour. She could inspire me to get myself going for a while, only to leave me needing another transfusion the moment the grogginess hits.

The strawberry blonde and I covered the usual bases two attracted strangers might discuss during a first encounter. She laughed at my punch

lines that weren't necessarily humorous. I listened to her talk about her family life. As we rounded the corner into the intersection of disclosing professions, I knew I had the deal sealed.

"In the past of this life, a long, long time ago, I was a writer," I told her. "But, for one to continue to call himself a writer, he must continue to perform the art of writing. That is something I haven't done in a very long while."

Eleven years to be exact.

For some incalculable reason, my experience is broads love writers. Writers are an ingeniously descriptive, yet mysterious species, someone once told me. We have a way with the precious aspects of grammar. Those commas, periods, and words just come to me, in ways that differ from everyone else. It gives people a certain image of me, whether it rings true or not. I must care about the little details, implying I can micromanage, which is a desirable trait.

So, when I reveal I am a critically acclaimed bestselling novelist, it becomes a layup. It is what I used to be anyway. I still haven't quite nailed down the tense on that one.

"What type of writing have you done?" she asked. "Is it something I may have come across?"

"It boils down to what type of reading you do and what genre you fancy on your nightstand," I said.

"Try me," she baited.

"Well," I hyped it up for full effect. I let out a deep sigh. "I am best known for one of my novels. Critics called it 'wittingly captivating.' *The Yellowest of Sunflowers*."

I watched her eyes as it registered. The file cabinets within her mind opened and she found the file with my name on it. Her pupils dilated and her mouth opened wider.

"You're Aaron Pence?" she said with a hint of surprise.

"Indeed I am."

She scanned her mind once again, looking to put two and two together. My face on the inside flap of the hardcover edition. She was realizing she read the novel and loved it. Probably saw the movie too. She would see the growth in age as well. A much younger version of the gentleman sitting before her lives within those pages. I like to think the hair color and facial structure has remained intact, which should confirm I am the individual I claim.

"I love that book," she exclaimed. "It is one of my favorites. The professor I had for this English course called 'Fiction of Historical Events' had us read it."

How long it took for us to go from that point to doing the naked dance in the dark in my apartment, I can't be certain. What I am sure of is

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how incredibly flexible and energetic she was. Very demanding too. Flip me this way, turn me over that way, go faster, go slower. It was much more than my attention span cared to handle.

She left me laying there, entirely drained of any ability to move. She slipped into the bathroom just outside my bedroom door for what seemed like an eternity. When she finally did emerge, she was fully dressed, purse over her shoulder. She walked over to me sprawled on the sheets, reached down and took my drained penis in her grasp. She gave it a good squeeze. "Great piece of equipment," is all she said.

She kissed me hard on the lips. Without another word, she showed herself out. I have a track record of being a poor host after the main event anyway. She probably saved herself some trouble. It dawned on me she never even told me her name. I was probably being broadcasted on the airwaves of the internet as she left. Her as the main character of her juicy sexual escapade with the forgotten Aaron Pence, nominated for best supporting dick, coming to a feed near you.

Glad I could be of service.

That brings it full circle, where I began to envision heaven and replaying the events of my night. It is ostensible I'll be going to some sort of hell at the end. A hell far worse than Dante ever envisioned. There is no doubt in my mind.

Instead of stirring in negativity, I decide to get out of bed in a feeble attempt to break the spell. I stretch my toes and listen to them crack. I find my bathrobe crumpled on the floor and throw it around my shoulders, leaving it open for air flow. I take a swig of Scotch from the half-empty Johnny Walker Blue Label permanently placed on my nightstand for over a decade. I prefer it to be full, but I can't seem to replace them as fast as I drink them. When the contents of the heavenly auburn liquid cease to mellow, I grab an unopened bottle from the bar in my living room. I always seem to be running out.

Walking through my apartment with the bottle tagging along, I feel lost. I have been lost since my one and only left. She left me in neutral at the wrong end of the spectrum. The mojo tank has read empty. My aptitude to write disbanded. I was a great writer for her, because of her. The various essences that collaborated in their united stance for my prosperity simply stopped working once the main contributor to that assembly line walked off the job.

The cold from the mahogany wood floor shoots up my spine. I make a pit stop in the kitchen for my cigar box, removing a fresh Cuban from the pile. I peer out the sliding door next to the sink to gaze onto the urbane borough I have called home, minus a short stint in LA, since I was eighteen years old. Brooklyn is more alive than it has ever been it seems. It doesn't share the same sinking feeling keeping me from slumber.

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Despite only wearing the bathrobe, I step out onto the balcony. I light my cigar and take pulls from the bottle standing in the seeping breeze of the early November night. It doesn't take much to start shivering. I just don't care. I have nothing to care about. I am a dead man walking.

The street below my feet is buzzing with action, even in the late hour. Groups of people are coming and going, some opting to brave the cold by walking, others hop in cars and taxis to shuttle them to their next destination. They talk and laugh and carry on precariously, seemingly moving forward without reflecting on what has occurred.

Brownstones three and four stories tall look back at me. The streetlamps glow fluorescent orange, second fiddle to the eclectic restaurants, clubs, and bars just down the way. Doors open and sounds of acoustic guitar latch onto the wind. It conjoins and travels upward, making a pass at me before moving on. It whispers sweet something as it reaches my ears, inviting me to bask in its urban smell.

Looking out upon the place, I visualize it going through its many shifts of culture and potency. The occupants of this borough have shifted significantly, catering to the young and hip. They wear their hair in funny ways. Underneath their plaid shirts and skinny jeans, their bodies are covered in piercings and tattoos. It almost saddens me to have lived through the different eras, but I don't believe anything is meant to stay the way it is.

When I first arrived on the scene, it was in a stage of deterioration, nowhere near the trendy hotspot it has branded itself. Danger was the theme. The subways and streets were filled with crime. I had many crises of faith whether I made the right decision to settle. It is on the shortlist of choices that panned out.

I stand outside until the bottle is dry and the cigar extinguished. I head back inside, wander into the kitchen, pondering what I have in the fridge. I am good and sloshed again, which has been a perpetual state for, well I can't remember how long. I hop onto the kitchen counter next to the fridge while picking at a vine of red grapes. The delight of the juices squirting across my tongue as I bite into their delicate flesh soon loses its luster. I can't keep myself focused to enjoy anything.

There is one thing I will not enjoy doing, which is informing people about the new predicament I am operating under. Not that there are many to tell, it's just there are a few who should know, even if it has no bearing on their mood. I have tried to shake the concept and abort, but ever since it has taken root it won't disengage from my brain. This is probably the tumor talking, or I am drunker than I can comprehend. I act on the impulse to use the phone and call the first person on the list.

This revelation will probably be very arduous to believe, but I have two children of my own. Twins actually; a son and a daughter. I was twenty-

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four when they were born. They are twenty-five now. I haven't spoken to either in over four years. It is a product of my failures delving in fatherhood. My last correspondence was a college tuition check. I didn't get an invite to their graduations.

My daughter's current place of residence is Omaha, Nebraska. She attended Creighton University, met a boy from what I remember, and opted to stay there. My son lives the bachelor life in San Diego, California. He graduated summa cum laude from the University of San Diego, got an internship with the hometown Padres, and never looked back. They really are great people from what I know about them. Their resumes speak for themselves. Any opinion I have is completely biased due to shared genetics and my lack of a relationship.

Even with the communication lines lacerated, I still remember my son's phone number. I get the cordless phone from its base in the kitchen and throw his digits into the phone. I listen to the hum of the call outgoing for five breaks until Robert answers. His voice is distorted on the other end. There seems to be a ton of background noise that clogs his words. I find myself shouting into the mouthpiece to no avail, only to angrily hang up.

A few minutes' pass and my phone chirps like a bird. I meant to change the stupid annoying sound, just never got around to it. The caller ID informs me my son is returning the call. I answer the phone immediately, yet play it nonchalantly, like I didn't call him first.

Robert gets right to the point. He wants to know why I am suddenly reaching out after such a long absence at the late hour. I ask him if he has any interest in flying to New York, at my expense, to have a face to face over cocktails.

"This is very typical of you Aaron," he declares, ignoring the father title. "Why do you always expect everyone to drop everything and come running at your request? I have a life of my own."

His response is followed by the click I am all too familiar hearing. In the back of my mind, I knew how the conversation would end before I even called. I just teed it up for him to shatter my hopes. It will go down as another victory for alcohol in the acting before thinking category.

I then scan through my address book for my daughter's number. This is not one I remember, as Ariadne wasn't the one that gave it to me. Robert reluctantly did during our last conversation four years earlier. I push in her number on a hope and a prayer, dialing long distance. The snappy broad I hear through the receiver informs me the wireless customer I am trying to reach is no longer in service.

With no other impulsive ideas on who to call, I toss the bottle in frustration. It shatters on the living room floor with a loud smash. I have destroyed many, if not all, of the foundations I built over the years. The relationship with my son was at the top of that list. I have wanted to repair

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these severed ties but am not mature enough to stand trial for all sins committed.

There is so much to be said and put back together in such a short time. I can already feel the rush of urgency flowing in my veins. It is such an oblong obstacle, the task of conveying what I must to those I feel compelled to tell. What I want to say is much longer than what I must say. It is discouraging me from the objective, when it should be propelling me towards it. My emotional scanner isn't optimized to work at full potential.

Another bottle of Johnny is on tap to decompress the messy feelings flying around. I retreat to my bedroom. I should probably just have a nice whack and fall asleep to ease the pain. I never seem to do what I should. I bust out the old laptop from my nightstand drawer.

I take a healthy sip from the freshly opened bottle and sit on the edge of my bed. I set the laptop in its designated space and turn it on. The illumination from the screen firing up in the darkness makes me squint my eyes. They adjust as I put my fingers down on the keys. I type in my password, good vibrations as one whole word with no capitalizations, and watch as the home screen loads.

The mouse drags as I move it onto the Internet icon and double-click with questionable intentions. I pull up the search engine to begin the hunt for the next available flight to sunny California. I stumble upon a decent deal for an economy ticket on a redeye in six hours. A cross country flight midweek isn't completely booked.

I do the check-in online. It is my first time using such a feature. It is a night of firsts. I even get to choose an aisle seat towards the back of the plane. I toss a couple of days' worth of clothing into a slim carry-on and put my head on the pillows to doze before I must set out. I manage a couple hours rest before I am up once again. I pay the bottle close attention between the shower and getting dressed, leaving the contents half empty. I put my laptop in the outside pocket of the rolling suitcase. I throw a jacket on over a white polo shirt and jeans and head out the front door of the apartment. I flag down a taxi and give the cabbie my destination.

Within two hours I am through security. The cabin door is locked, my tray table is securely fastened, and we are wheels up in the sky cruising amongst the clouds. I look down upon JFK and the five boroughs as they rapidly shrink with the climbing altitude. I shut my eyes as the plane becomes one with the wind, wondering what the fuck I am doing.