

GOOD PEOPLE

A Novel by Steven Key Meyers

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1.

A nor'easter was lashing Manhattan the October night Rex Black raided Poor Richard's Cabaret. Wind and rain sliced at the city from an unaccustomed angle, doing damage as storms from no other point of the compass can do. Trees fell in Central Park, cars were set afloat in underground parking garages, pedestrians slogged across streets awash with what seemed a rising tide, and throughout the island loathsome slime began creeping up through basement drains.

Inside the club, at the piano, Dooley started *Baby, It's Cold Outside*. Margo the waitress put down her tray and stepped up to the mic and they sang it together cheerfully and suggestively. They segued to *Stormy Weather* and *I'm Always Chasing Rainbows*.

In 46th Street blurry yellow taxis and black cars stood nose to tail, not moving, but somehow a white stretch limousine pulled up to claim the width of the club. It sat for a time as wild winds rocked it and sheets of rain thrummed furiously on the roof and cascaded off in side curtains. Finally the driver ventured out to open the back door. As his umbrella flared in flame-shaped collapse, two figures tumbled out and ran under the canopy and indoors.

Platinum locks flying behind eager lighted eyes, Joey burst in first. He moved with vehement angularity, throwing off speed lines like a Haring, never moving with less than total commitment, never not moving.

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"Mike!" he said to the tall, sandy-haired man watching morosely from beside the door. "Never see *you* here."

"Stepped in for one beer," Michael replied. "And, lo, the rains came."

Joey's companion meanwhile entered and stood against the door. This man seemed ill-paired with him—well-dressed and self-contained, with slick features that gave nothing away, a good haircut and excellent Italian sportcoat. At perhaps thirty-five he was a few years older than Joey or Michael. He gleamed as with a coat of gloss, but his slightly skinned-looking eyes (there was a small flat triangle of flesh beneath each one) were dry and watchful.

"Rex," said Joey, tugging at Italian wool. "This is Mike, the manager's friend."

Rex marshaled his features agreeably and showed strong white teeth as he extended a hand.

"No kidding?" he said. "Rex Black."

"Rex is my boss," said Joey. "He's good people, you've heard me."

"Sure," Michael said. Usually litanies of complaint, occasionally litanies of adoration, broadcast wherever Joey happened to be downing his margaritas. Rex owned a comedy club uptown called the Gag Reflex. "Mike Roberts. A pleasure."

He led them to the near end of the bar, by the cellar steps. Their passage introduced an alien current, left a wake of hair being smoothed, collars tugged, itches solved—something of the anxiety a shark passing near a school of fish inspires. Dooley hit a harsh chord and grimaced.

The storm had only blown in at curtain time, so the club was not as empty as it might have been, except that it was Friday, when it should have been full. Everybody was making the best of it, and for once the space—a high-tech takeoff on Art Deco, not warm but very chic—seemed cozy. People drank and chatted, flirting across the room as Dooley embroidered show tunes and Justin the bartender served up drinks. Rose-colored gels washed years off every face, making it an assembly of juveniles. His fans watched Conor, the manager, helping behind the bar. The bravest leaned across to give his beautiful brow a smooch. He would shy away laughing, then look back in his cool, assessing way from a face drawn in clean Irish design—cheekbones that cast shadows, tight black curls, blue eyes of painful sensitivity.

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Meanwhile Joey and Rex put their heads together, Joey whispering, Rex's eyes moving across the room.

Conor saw Michael peeling the label off his Molson's and asked, his accent pure Queens, "Ready for another, Dolls?"

Joey spoke up.

"Hey Conor, who do you have to fuck around here to get a drink?"

Rex flinched.

"Don't look at *me*," said Conor, "I'm a married man." With an access of golden light across his face he put pursed lips across the bar.

"Where did *you* come from? In this *weather*?"

"From my boss's stretch limo," said Joey. "Hope you appreciate the sacrifice."

Margo screamed. They saw her twist her tray around and bop a seated man on the head as his hands vanished into her skirt. Conor vaulted the bar. Joey dove into the uproar. Moments later a chunk of it moved for the door, Conor, Joey and three or four regulars carrying the man by kicking, twisting legs and arms that had them staggering into each other. Rex and Michael brought up the rear. The man was saying "fucking faggots, can say no, she wants, suck my dick." They lofted him out to the sidewalk, into the shocking rain. The limo driver looked askance.

"Next door," said Conor.

"Hey, lemme go, getting *wet*!" the man said with new clarity. "Said lemme go, cocksuckers!"

They carried him into the mid-block parking lot. A passing couple bent beneath an umbrella appeared not to notice.

"Drop him."

They dropped him. The man grabbed for Conor's ankle. Conor kicked him in the side.

"*One*," he told him. "Hands off the waitresses, you horrifying asshole." He kicked again. "*Two*: Stay the fuck out of my bar. *Three*—"

The man flinched but Conor didn't kick. Instead he squatted by his head.

"Or are we clear?"

The man sat up and screamed curses. Conor pushed his face at him and screamed louder: "So you're crazy? NOT AS CRAZY AS ME!"

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The man launched himself. Conor caught his chin with a knee, and he rolled back and lay quiet.

"Thanks, guys. We're getting wet."

They were soaked. Inside Conor rewarded his helpers with a round of drinks and handed out paper towels with a lavish hand. Margo threw her arms around him and kissed him while he rubbed her back in brotherly fashion. He looked more upset than she did. Strength protects weakness: old-fashioned but primal. He seemed easier after a minute. Margo felt for the pen in her ear and went back to work, and Conor asked Rex what he wanted to drink and gave it to him.

"Don't believe we were introduced before the brouhaha," said Rex, extending his hand. "Rex Black."

"Um, um, um," said Conor, snatching back his hand. "Heard about you."

"Like the way you dealt with that guy. Who was he, anyway?"

"Some skeezy jerk," said Conor. "Who knows?"

"Unbelievable night, but I see you're doing business."

"You doing any?"

"Called from the stretch: Sold out, almost. Hundred sixty seats, two shows."

"Yikes. We seat fifty and sell out, like, *never*. Hey guys, want to catch the late show?"

"Who is it?" Rex asked.

"Rosetta Stone? The comedian?"

"She's a riot," Joey advised Rex.

"Gag Reflex material?"

"You might not think so," Joey said carefully.

"How about it, Conor? Gag Reflex material?"

"Couldn't say," said Conor. "Never been up there."

"Never been to the *Gag Reflex*?" asked Rex. "*Amazed*. Here I thought I owned the hottest club in New York."

The early show ended. A waitress anchored the showroom door open, and men and women (mostly men) trailed out, claiming their coats and jamming beneath the hammering canopy to watch the unmoving file of cars. Honks from Ninth Avenue advanced by relays past the club to Eighth. Brake lights went dark and the line eased ahead, then red splashed urgently and only the din of horns moved forward.

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Before the door closed and smothered horns and rain, someone new slipped inside, and Dooley broke into Hall and Oates' old hit *Man-Eater*.

"Thanks, Dooley," the woman called, "and fuck *you*."

"Rosetta!" shouted men across the room.

She checked her red slicker and came around the corner with her face wet and shining. She nodded at Conor, Joey, Michael; when she saw Rex the shine went incandescent. She knew by sight every club owner in town.

"How's it hanging, Joey? Conor, give me a drink and I'll blow you."

"Keep your lips off me, bitch."

Justin handed Conor a Scotch and he handed it to her. She sipped daintily, ignoring Rex, who meanwhile showed his teeth again as he asked Michael, "What do *you* do?"

"I proofread at *Time Magazine*, Saturday nights."

Rex's smile expired. Rosetta drilled into Michael from the other side.

"There must be more to you," she said. "You're a *writer*, aren't you?"

He admitted it.

"I *thought* so."

She waited. Her dark eyes, limpid and sexy, had an unsettling quality, perhaps owing to her half-Asian ancestry. It was as if the East in them transfixed you while the West knocked you out.

"Working on a play," Michael told her. "Adapting Daniel Defoe's book *A Journal of the Plague Year*? I call it *Foe*."

"Great title," Rosetta said dryly. "Love to read it."

"Really?"

"Conor's isn't far from me. I'll come by."

"Rosetta," Joey said, "know my boss, Rex Black?"

She looked affable but blank.

"How nice to meet you. Believe this weather?" She turned from one to the other like a cat rubbing its face, marking its territory. Then she squeezed Joey's ass. "So glad you came for my show. But now I must dress."

Gravely she went downstairs.

Rex asked Joey, "What do we do now?"

Joey hooked a thumb: "*Amscray*?"

But first Rex approached Conor's ear, gingerly, as though it were an already-licked ice cream cone. Joey leaned in close.

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"Conor, know *why* the Gag Reflex is SRO tonight? In the middle of a fucking *hurricane*?"

Conor shook his damp head.

But Joey was bursting: "Because '*Comedy is the rock and roll of the Eighties*'!"

"Fucking *Rolling Stone* said that," Rex snapped. "Got plans up there. Drop by, be my guest."

"Thanks," said Conor.

"Seriously, making some changes. Hope Joey hasn't breathed a word – top secret – but someone knows how to run a room like you do, find it worth checking out."

"Conor, you've *got* to," said Joey.

"Hey, I'm there."

Rex had what he came for, so when Dooley announced Rosetta's show, causing a flow into the showroom, he and Joey said goodbye and beat it. Rosetta, ready for the stage, passed through the bar gracious as a queen. She paused at the showroom door to allow her audience's applause to engulf her. Then she went in and the closing door muffled the clapping, made it sound far away, like the rain.