

DON'T KISS THE RABBIT



A NOVELETTE
BY RODNEY C. LAWLEY

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CHAPTER ONE

Always his brother's keeper, Rupert T. Miller handed over his last five dollars for a number-two meal. It was a favorite for his little brother, a double-meat bacon and cheese that would be consumed in three bites or less. But Rup knew the meal was the last of the good times, the last of the release money from the Huntsville Unit.

Flexing sinewy muscles, he turned the heavy steering wheel and backed his twenty-year-old station wagon into the setting sun of the west lot. Pacific Boulevard stretched in front of him, a bumper-to-bumper state route that was a main thoroughfare for the Regulars, Rup's term for nine-to-fivers. They lived regular lives, had houses, jobs, and dogs with puppies. Most were on their way home from careers in office cubicles or shopping at the North Star Mall. Rup didn't hate the Regulars. Hell, he once wanted to be one. But that dream was before Momma died. That dream was screwed.

Big Sydney, his three-hundred pound special-needs brother, sat beside Rupert slurping on the last vestige of a super-size cherry cola.

"We gonna do it this time Rup?" Sid set the cherry cola on the floorboard between his legs. "We gonna be bad?"

"Maybe," Rup responded, grabbing a handful of fries from the bag in Sydney's lap. "We'll wait a while, give the Regulars time to get home and eat supper."

Sydney smiled, licking the ketchup from the foil of the burger wrap.

Across Pacific, at Aedan's Fine Jewelry and Gold, a street artist placed the finishing touches on a window mural of a large cartoon rabbit.

"Why's he painting a big bunny?"

"Don't know Sydney."

"I think it's staring at us."

"Uh huh."

"That's much better," Aedan Kane explained to the artist. "But it's still not worth eighty dollars." He pulled three twenties from his money clip and held them out for the man. "I think this is more than fair for your effort. Don't you?"

The artist, a gaunt unshaven man in his late fifties, nodded unenthusiastically and took the cash. He picked up his materials and spotted the station wagon across the highway. Flashing a quick thumbs-up, the job was done.

At sixty, Aedan was still a good businessman, a jeweler that could always hustle an extra dollar before the cash turned.

Abigail Kane, his unmarried daughter and co-owner of the store, approached her father as the artist walked away. "That isn't the design we agreed on," she sighed, as she studied the mural. "You know I don't want this overtly commercial Dad."

"This is a make-believe rabbit painting Abby. What's the harm in a little aggressive usury babble for the benefit of the store?"

She looked at the bright red letters now replacing the familiar "What's up, Doc?" she had planned. "Easy Credit Terms Lickety-Splat" the new phrase read.

"Lickety-Splat?" She pressed her fingers to her lips, trying to restrain a burgeoning smile. "Funny Dad. I haven't heard that one since first grade. Then again, I do remember Mom telling me your an expert on cartoons."

"That's silly."

"Something about Mickey and Minnie nightmares?" she smiled. "Was it the big mouse ears Dad or the squeaky voices?"

"Okay Abigail."

"Yeah." Abby tilted her head playfully then picked up a discarded wrapper from the sidewalk and headed back into the store.

Aedan knew what she was doing. As a single father, he was well aware of the subtle steering mechanisms his daughter implemented to illustrate his buffoonery. And she was damn good at it. He still remembered a nine-year old Abigail chastising him in front of a roomful of customers after he gently scolded her for displaying damaged flowers on the store's sales counter. After all, the flowers were missing petals, had broken stems, and were even beginning to wilt.

But Abigail didn't see it that way.

"Broken flowers are the special ones Dad," she had replied, as she gently arranged them into a beautiful bouquet. " They're the ones God kissed."

Aedan watched as Abigail returned to her work station in the rear of the store and sat upon a wooden bench at her lapidary wheel.

"So, how did we do last week?" she asked, flipping a switch to engage the large abrasive.

Aedan, holding the weekly sales report, adjusted his bifocals and scanned the numbers. "Well, we won't need a cash drop."

"That doesn't sound good. What's the net?"

Aedan feigned deafness and placed the report into a manila envelope that he sealed and tossed to his desk. "It's closing time Abby."

Abigail watched her father grab the store's main key ring and walk through the sales door into the showroom.

"Are you ignoring me again Dad?"

A loud "Kerr-clunk" reverberated through the store.

"Dad?"

CHAPTER TWO

Aedan awakened moments later in a pool of blood on the sales counter floor. Only a small generator-powered light flickered above him, but he could see that his hands and legs were bound with thin jewelry wire.

A plastic coin tray crashed to the floor.

"Son of a bitch!" the shadowed stammered.

Aedan pushed himself from the floor onto his hands and knees. He struggled to identify the shadow above him.

Rupert, known in prison as 'The Cutter' because of his proclivity to kill and maim with shank weapons, moved quickly and methodically through the cash register.

"What are you doing here?"

"About time you woke up," Miller said sternly, as he pulled a wrinkled dollar bill from under the register base and stuffed it into his pant's pocket. "Ain't nothing but bitch change in here. Why is that?"

Twenty feet away, in her father's office, Abby was forcefully pinned to the floor by the half wit Sydney. He ripped clothing from her like a lascivious wolf.

"What's your name?" He breathed heavily; forcing his body into her.

Abigail refused.

"Can't you say nothin' bitch?" His spittle flew. "Ain't you gonna moo like a cow fer' me?"

Abigail turned her head. The school-boy taunts still hurt. She was fourteen and in grade school when they started. Her teacher asked if her name was Abigail or Abby, but she wasn't allowed to answer. Instead, Lee Sheldon yelped out for her, "Crabby Abby! That's her name!"

"Yeah, that's it Baby," Sydney grunted, reaching his climax and loosening his clutch upon her neck.

But Abby was tougher now. Despite her lack of beauty, she knew she

was blessed. She lived with the hope of her father's promise, the one he made that very day after school. He told her she was beautiful and made a golden ring of hearts to remind her of that.

"This is God's Kiss," he had told her, as he slid the ring onto her finger. "It will be your wedding ring one day."

Will he kiss me?" she had asked, wishing upon the sparkle in her father's eyes.

But now, many years later, the promise had grown stale. But her father still believed; his hope her only blessing.

Sid grabbed a strand of Abby's brown hair and yanked it into a knot. He pulled it hard, forcing her to look at him squarely. "I like your hair. It smells like flowers."

"Please no," she whispered. "I'm begging you."

But his face moved to hers.

"NO!"

The kiss was forced upon her, and her father's promise died with a fool's lust.

In the main showroom, Abigail's father suffered more interrogation. He had not heard Abigail's voice and assumed she was safe, perhaps calling for help.

"Where's the rest of the money old man?"

"There is no more. I've told you twice."

Miller looked toward the back office for his brother Sydney. The door was open just enough for Rupert to see Sid straddling the owner's obese daughter on the floor.

"I have nothing else. The jewelry alone, it's worth thousands. Just take it and leave."

"No...! Stop!" Abigail yelled.

The shriek shocked Kane. He turned his head to the office, realizing Abby was in dire trouble.

"Nobody never punched you like that afore have they girl?" Sydney chastised, as a thin trickle of blood oozed from her lips.

"Let her go...! Please! I'll take you to the ATM ... give you my key code ... anything you bastards want."

"Stop it!" Abigail flailed her arms with rage. "You're hurting me!"

Rupert shrugged his shoulders as he watched old man Kane's eyes widen. "I can see that you're upset with my little brother. He do like choking the big girls."

"I'll kill you."

"Kill me...? Why I ain't got nothin' to do with that party Kane. You think maybe she likes it?"

Abigail dug her nails deep.

"Aahh shit girl! You done hurt me! You gonna make me do it ain't ya!"

"Leave me alone!"

"Rup! Rup she cut me! The bitch cut me!"

"Help me Daddy! Make him stop it!"

The old man dropped his head in despair, rocking his body back and forth with intense anger. "If I were a younger man, I would ... "

"Boom!"

Kane's heart skipped.

"Shit Sydney!" Rupert looked back and saw his brother standing in the doorway. He still held the Colt revolver.

Abigail covered the wound with her hand. "Daddy! Oh God!"

"I'm here Baby!"

"Daddy, help ... "

"Boom! Boom!"

"Abigail...! Abigail are you okay?"

Rupert took a step toward Sydney in anger, then stopped. "I told you not to kill the bitch!"

Abigail's eyes looked to the flickering light overhead. She smiled briefly, then her eyes rolled.

Sydney holstered the revolver and pulled his britches up. He re-fastened the elastic suspenders over his protruding belly and turned to respond to his brother's scolding.

"She shouldn't a cut me Rup," he scowled. "That wasn't nice a' her at all."

Rupert stared at Sid silently, stunned by the ignorance of his own mother's blood.

"You shot her cause' she cut you?"

"Uh huh."

"Three times Sydney?"

"Uh huh."

"You dumb bastard. Every ho-dunk Mayberry Pig in Texas will have a hard-on for us."

"Sorry," Sid replied, as he shuffle-stepped to his brother's side. His hanging head begged for forgiveness, and he held his injured hand to Rupert's eyes for inspection. A droplet of blood surrounded the linear wound.

Rup nodded. "That...? That's your reason for shooting that cannon?"

"She was a helluva' ride," he drawled with a good-old-boy grin, attempting to deflect Rup's anger with some perverted humor. "You should a' got you some for I kilt' her," he snickered.

"Shut up Sydney."

Kane, sobbing uncontrollably, rocked back and forth on his knees like a depraved psychotic.

"Stop it Pops. Your little fairy princess is dead."

"You had no right."

"She shouldn't a cut me with her fingernails," Sydney said, eyeballing the old man, as he cradled his injured hand. "I done just like you told me Rup. Somebody hurts me or you, I shoot em' dead, first thang, no shit. That's the rule. Ain't that the rule Rup?"

Rupert patted his brother on the back. He was a slow-minded oaf, but blood kin. "You done right Sid. But now we gotta kill the old man too. You see why that's a problem don't you?"

"Golly Rup ... I'm real sorry 'bout messin' up." Pulling the .38 revolver from his holster, he looked at the old man with a twinkle in his eye. "I'll do him though. I'll do him good."

"No. You won't do him Sid. We work quietly on these jobs. You've got to learn."

"Quiet. That's right." Sid holstered the gun and watched his brother finger-tap a leather knife sheath on his belt. Sid slapped his palms against the top of his head repeatedly, chanting loudly, "I'm stupid ... I'm stupid ... I'm stupid."

"Stop it Sydney. Remember what Momma told you about that?"

"Not good for my thinkin' cells."

"That's right Sydney, it's not good for your thinking. Now, you calm down. Okay? You take that duffel bag to the car, and you wait with the engine running."

"Uh huh."

"Repeat that Sydney ... I need to know you got it."

"Get duffel bag into car and wait. Yeah Rup, that's what I'm gonna do. No more problems, honest."

"That's good Sid. Now See to it."

"Rup?"

"Yes Sydney."

"Well...? Ain't you gonna tell me how much money we got?"

"Just get the shit in the car!"

Sydney carried the neon-green duffel bag like a woman's purse. He looked at the glassy-eyed Abigail as he walked by her. Her stare followed him, mocking him for his ignorance. "I'm just stupid," he mumbled, as he walked out the door.

Back at the cash register, Rupert abandoned his pursuit of the night

deposit and instead focused on a quick score.

"Give me the gold old man," Rupert pointed to a signet ring on Kane's right-hand. "Give it to me now, with no shit, and I'll make this quick for you."

"You can't have it. It'll never belong to a hell dog like you."

"You sure bout' that Kane?" Rupert rolled his fingers on the leather knife sheath. "Cause' I can make this shit hurt. I can make it hurt for a long long time."

"I'll see you in hell."

"Whoa Kane.... Whoa now. Ain't that a terrible thing for a father to say? Don't you want to follow your little fat bitch to heaven?"

Kane closed his right hand into a fist, wrapping the fingers of his left around it also.

"Well now Kane, maybe you ain't scared of me," Rupert said calmly, as he pulled the switch blade and flicked it open. "But it's too late for you to get brave. Your on your knees man, lying about your pathetic little money while your little jolly rancher got raped by a Texas retard. At this point Mr. Kane, I'd have to label you a pussy of a man."

Kane spat on his boots.

Rupert, with the calm deliberation of a man that had killed many times, knelt to one knee and grabbed Aedan's shirt. He pulled the old man into the point of the knife, pressing it between two ribs. He pushed the blade in slowly at first--just enough to penetrate the skin and start the bleed--but no more. Rup liked it when they looked to the sky for help, like they was expecting Jesus to fly down and save them.

But Aedan didn't look up. Instead, he focused on the eyes of The Cutter, burning the image into his soul.

Plunging the knife in, Rupert twisted the handle back and forth to open the wound as wide as possible. He liked to hear the sucking and gurgling of air escaping the lungs.

Kane tensed.

Rupert heard every labored breath now. Killing with a knife was orgasmic for him, the closest a man could get to death without taking the trip himself.

Kane slumped into the knife, his fall controlled by Rupert's grip.

"Now old man. I think you're gonna' give me that ring."

Kane's dying stare was locked, as the killer palm-cupped his head and laid him upon the floor.

"You can feel it leaving can't you? Your life?"

And he did.

Rupert pulled the blade from Kane's chest, using it to cut the thin wire securing his hands. He forced Aedan's wrist onto the floor.

Kane tried to resist--to tighten his fist--but he could not.

Rupert extended the fingers onto the concrete. A crisp thrust of the knife severed the ring finger.

With the morphine of death upon him, Kane felt no pain. "Soon," he stammered, his voice cracking.

Rupert held the detached appendage--with the ring still upon it--inches from Aedan's nose. "You see Kane, you old fool, my name is Rupert T. Miller. I get what I want in this world."

Aedan coughed blood-tinged spittle to the floor, and his eyes glazed to death's waxy sheen.

"That was too quick you cheap bastard," Rupert mumbled, as he took a cleaning rag from the counter and sprayed the fabric with glass cleaner. He wiped blood from the band and found the ring to be heavy and of exceptional quality. Circling the exterior of his prize was an interlocking heart design in deep intaglio. Upon the inner surface was an inscription in cursive Spanish. "*Beso de Dios 24K*," it read. "Kiss of God," Rupert translated, his prison-learned Spanish serving him well.

"You comin' Brother?" Sydney yelled from the back. "We got's to go Rup! We got's to go!"

"The twenty-four-karat kiss of God," Rupert thought to himself, as he slid the blessing onto his left-ring finger and dropped the bloody rag onto Kane's body. "I like that shit."

Rupert left the building in darkness and quietly closed the driver's door of the ninety-three station wagon. He idle-drove the car out of the alleyway with the head lights off and headed for the interstate

two blocks away.

"Where we goin' Rupert?" Sydney asked, as he reloaded his revolver by feel.

"They gonna be on us hotter than a whore on a Benjamin in the morning Sydney. I figure we'll take the State Road tonight, then cruise on out to the border in Presidio at daybreak."

"Can I drive me some Rup? You promised ... remember?"

"I reckon you can once we clear the Rio Grande ... maybe west of Comstock."

Satisfied, Sid holstered. "See Rup, I told you I could help."

"Yeah ... sure thing kid. All you gotta do is stay on Highway 90 and wake me at Marfa. Can you handle that?"

"Marfa ... yeah Rup. Wake you at Marfa."

"That's right Brother." Rupert placed his hand lovingly on Sid's neck and began to massage it. "Now you climb in the back and get some sleep. I need you brushy eyed and bright tailed after midnight."

"Ha ... that's what Momma used to say."

CHAPTER THREE

The rumble of a DT 466 diesel engine purred through the open air, as Rupert was awakened by the accompanying clank of servo gears meshing steel teeth into a tow-truck's lift drive. The grinding metallic sound drilled through Rup's throbbing migraine and threatened to explode his cranium like a firecracker on a Chinese New Year.

"Where the fuck," he mumbled in sleepy talk, as he turned his head side to side on the wagon's back seat.

An invasive red and yellow light flooded the interior of the wood-grain wagon. It flickered on and off and on and off like a geriatric heartbeat on A-fib. The colors consumed the car, blurring Rupert's vision and challenging his sanity. But ever-so-slowly, his eyes began to regain their focus through the kaleidoscope. The little white blob on the back floorboard transformed almost magically into a crumpled burger bag. It even had a cherry-cola stain.

"Sydney! Wake the hell up! Are we in Marfa?"

The clanking noise suddenly subsided as abruptly as it began. Rupert could now hear the twang of country music buzzing at low volume just outside the car. He pulled himself upright, peering into into the front seat for Sid or an unused six pack. But Sid wasn't there, neither was the beer.

"Shit!" Rupert slammed his hand against the headliner, realizing Sid had taken the keys and the jewels with him. "I'm gonna kill you Sydney. I'm gonna send you straight to stupid hell."

Rup scanned the front seat for a clue. It wasn't Sydney's nature to do anything alone--much less walk away with the stash. He noticed a hairline crack in the rear-view mirror, and a thick cake of mud covered the front windshield. "Weird shit," he thought, as he cranked the window down and peeked outside. He could see the display flashing above him. It read, "BOX CAR PAWN & DINER."

Rupert climbed out of the car, stepping onto the gravel-paved parking lot with only a pair of socks on. He took a quick inventory of his surroundings. The music was coming from a gray tow truck about thirty-feet away.

A wiry-boned wrecker driver drug a heavy chain toward the rear of a Cadillac with front-end damage. He was preparing a tow.

Rupert pulled his boots on and tucked his jeans into the shoes. He

rubbed the sleep from his eyes and watched the driver stretch the chain past the rear tire of the Car. Patsy Cline's, "I love You So Much, It Hurts," blared from the truck's speakers.

Rup walked toward the driver. "Hey Man. Where the hell am I? I just woke up, and I feel like my head is on fire."

The driver nodded, wiping the sweat from his brow. "It's probably the heat Mister. But to answer your question, folks call this place Acheron Shores."

"Acher what?"

"I figured you'd say that. Most do when they first hear it. Just call it shit hole if you want to. You wouldn't be piss-in' too far off."

"Ah, I understand, but that doesn't help me with my bearings. Which way is El Mexico?"

The driver pointed toward the roadway two-hundred feet away. "You see that asphalt over yonder?"

"Is that Highway 90?"

"Yep. I mean si' senior." He reached down to hook the chain link around a drive axle. "I ride Ninety all the time. I suppose you could call me the Highwayman. You know, like the song."

"Nah, sorry. But that's good news. At least we're on the right road for Presidio." He pulled a pack of Menthol Lights from his shirt pocket and lit a cigarette.

"Ain't never been that far."

"Say buddy, you ain't seen a big chubby fella round here have you? He'd have a duffel bag with him."

"Hmm. Don't think so, but there ain't nowhere to go except the Diner. That's where they all go."

"Yeah ... okay." Rup checked the time on his wristwatch, and exhaled a drag of nicotine. He had never known Sydney to abandon him like this, much less at three-thirty in the morning.

He threw the cigarette stub to the dirt and stepped inside the diner. The odor of rancid pork, bleach, and a particularly odoriferous brand of bug spray immediately overwhelmed him. A ragged-looking waitress, a senior citizen with a yellow apron, sat in a nearby booth.

"You can sit anywhere Honey," she said haggardly. "Menus are on the table."

The cancer-thin woman remained seated in a booth just below the grill area. She was engrossed in a game of two-deck solitaire, and had assembled the cards like pieces of patchwork quilt on the table.

Rupert stared at her from the doorway, his patience thin. "Actually, I'm not hungry. I'm looking for my little brother."

Refusing to look away from the cards, she pointed to a sign on the register with a long red fingernail. She tapped the tin sign for emphasis. There were three rules:

- 1.No freebies.
- 2.Cash or trade only.
- 3.Car key deposit required for Pawn access.

"He's my height, but a lot bigger."

"Coffee's five dollars a cup," she said, turning her head briefly as she lay a card onto the table.

"Okay, I'll have a cup." He walked across the room and sat in the booth beside her.

She started to speak, but he pulled her body tightly against his shoulder and silenced her. He leaned his head slightly downward, brushing his nose against her ear. "I asked you a question bitch. I reckon you best answer."

A subtle smile crossed her face, and she dealt another card. She hadn't felt the whisper of a man in many years, and she liked it.

Rupert pulled the blade from its sheath, flicking it open, and twirling the handle for show. He rammed it into a card she still held in her wrinkled fingertips.

"Hmm." She studied the half-inch gap between her index finger and the blade and exhaled a vile breath through four front teeth. "You're a mean little shit ain't you?"

Repulsed, Rupert turned to breathe the more palatable bacon-bleach-bug-spray. "He's carrying a green duffel bag. Have you seen him or not?"

She studied the erect knife, still swaying side to side on the table from the residual vibration of the impact. She considered grabbing

it, then thought better. "Did you know you stabbed the ace of spades Sweet Pea?" She grabbed his crotch under the table and squeezed.

Rupert grabbed her hand, squeezing harder. "You gonna make me stick you?"

"That's a bad omen, sticking the death card like that," she replied, as she relaxed her testicular grip.

Rupert pulled the knife from the table and held it to her face.

"Say, Mr. D.," she said calmly, looking over her left shoulder toward the grill. "Have you seen this boy's fat-ass brother? He don't have time for a friendly cup of Joe, but he's dandy at stabbing our card table."

As if from nowhere, a heavy-set black man, wearing a white chef's toque arose from behind the counter. "Feed Your Head," was tattooed on his forehead and a .38 snub-nose revolver was in his hand. He pointed it at Rupert.

Rup dropped the knife.

"You mean that punk-ass white boy that traded me a Gucci for two cheeseburgers and a Cherry Cola?"

"Mr. D. huh?"

"Yeah Dillinger, he's the cook."

"Yeah. That's my Bro. He loves those cherry colas." Rupert retrieved his knife, then carefully backed from the table.

"You forgot my five dollars for the coffee mother fucker." The Cook punched the sale button on the register, and a loud 'ka-ching' echoed through the diner, finalizing the sale.

"What if I make it twenty ... no ... make it forty dollars for the coffee. You deserve it for the trouble. Just tell me where the fat boy is."

"The knife," the Cook replied, shaking the .38 for emphasis.

"Say what?"

"I like the knife Boy.... Give it to me."

"You know where he's at?"

The Cook, his mouth half open, nodded affirmatively.

Rupert slid the knife on the floor toward the woman. He pulled two twenties from his wallet and flicked them to the floor along with the knife. "Now where the fuck is my brother?"

The Cook motioned for the waitress to pickup the money and the knife. He pointed to an elevator at the back of the room. "He took the one-way to the Box Car Pawn. Maybe you ought to do the same. You looks the type."

"You think I'm an idiot? No pawn shop opens this early."

"They is always open. Big boy said he had some things to sell, so I sent him to the Box."

"An elevator ... really? In the middle of the fucking desert?"

"That's what everybody says," the waitress replied, as she returned to her booth and reshuffled the cards. "But it is what it is."

CHAPTER FOUR

Rupert stepped into the elevator and closed the heavy door manually. He turned a crank lever to the bottom position, and the ancient contraption came to life. Two minutes later, the car stopped with a loud thud. Rupert turned the crank and exited.

Greeting him was a Nineteenth-Century stone-paved walkway as wide as a modern two-lane interstate. The walls surrounding the path were constructed of mortar and stone, and they extended to the solid-rock ceiling twelve feet overhead. Gyrating lights of color bounced from the walls in the distance, and he heard the thumping bass music of Goldfrapp's "Ooh La La" echoing through the chamber.

"What the hell?" Rupert stepped into the corridor and walked toward the lights. Thirty feet in, he noticed railroad tracks embedded into the center of the path. He figured it to be an old mining shaft.

As he approached the colorful lights, he saw cast-iron fencing to his left which surrounded a cavernous room filled with people dancing. It appeared to be a nightclub.

The enclosure was at least a thousand-square feet, and it was designed with a railroad motif that--from Rup's perspective--resembled a prison ward. Iron security bars separated the club from the corridor and extended from deep within the stone flooring into the sedimentary rock ceiling overhead.

As he searched for an entry, Rupert stumbled upon an old man sitting in the middle of the corridor. He was embracing both knees and buried his head into the void between his kneecaps. The man was well dressed, but appeared to be drunk or injured.

The old man--without raising his head from his lap-- raised his palm to Rupert and opened the hand like a beggar.

Rupert ignored the man, advancing further into the canal. Walking faster now, Rupert noticed the corridor terminated fifty feet ahead. To his left was a small entrance way lined by the same iron fencing, but this walkway was much narrower. He turned into the narrow entrance and followed it to an old steel freight car embedded into the fencing. Just past the car, the pathway terminated at an ornate iron gate. It was locked and closed, but it had a phrase--perhaps Latin-- upon it.

Goldfrapp's music continued to boom through the ancient chamber, with colorful lights dancing in synchronous rhythm.

"I need Ooh La La La,..."

"Thump ... thump ... thump...."

Rupert approached a red awning extending from an open window of the freight car. A white light flickered within.

"Welcome sweet cheeks," a high-pitched man--or so Rupert assumed--said from the iron-barred ticket window. "I'm the Gatekeeper, and I'm at your service."

The curious-looking man opened a smaller hinge door in the window, sticking his head out to inspect Rupert from head to toe. His neck had a brass collar tethered to a steel-linked chain extending upward behind him.

"I thought this was a pawn shop," Rupert asked, as he noted the man's painted-on white face and conical-shaped green hair.

"Mmmm ... yummy yum," the man lusted, as he placed a pinky finger to his mouth and bit it lightly. He ignored Rupert's comment, then pulled his head back into the cage.

"So this is a nightclub huh?"

"Oh no baby. We're a pawn shop," the man reassured, as he adjusted the frame of his pink plastic eyeglasses that were sans a right eye lens.

Rupert edged closer, peeking into the interior. He knew Sid had to be close.

"We just trade for more interesting things than money here," he winked.

Rupert smiled politely--he wasn't ready to have another revolver shoved into his face. Not yet anyway. He grabbed the iron bars and pulled his face against them. "I'm looking for my ... "

"My name is Roger Wabbit," the Gatekeeper interrupted. "I like to fuck like a rabbit, but they won't let me play. Do you like to play?"

"What?"

"You know, F-U-C-K ... right? What's your name Honey?"

Rupert's hand instinctively reached for the stainless. "Damn."

"You do have one? A name?"

Rupert traced the path of the chain collar to an overhead metal track which slid back and forth along the length of the vault's interior. "Say Roger? What's the deal with the railroad spike in your hair and that brass collar locked around your neck? Are you on fucking work release?"

"Ha ... ha ... hee ...! My my player, you make me want to tinkle in my little panties," he replied, waving both hands into the air limp-wristed. "Hmm ... well, no. No one can incarcerated me. I'm actually a dignitary, the official gatekeeper here at the Box Car. They keep me locked and chained to my work ... so to speak. It's like a super-sexy fire-code sort of thing ... you understand Lover?"

"Oh, I see. You're a safety guy, first one in, last one out. That sort of thing."

"Yeah. You got it Baby. Now, what's that name?"

"You can call me Peter Pan if you want Roger. Like I told you, I'm just here looking for my ... "

"Hey Rup! Rup, over here!"

Rupert turned left to the swirling lights and the darkness of the club. He spotted Sydney waving wildly from a leopard-skin couch near the main bar. He was surrounded by two topless strippers, both exploring his brother's nether regions with their hands.

"Never mind Wabbit. What's the cover for this pussy palace?"

"Well what do you have for me Peter?" The Gatekeeper shrugged, dancing his head side to side with the beat.

"Huh?"

The Wabbit pointed a well-manicured index finger to a placard above the teller window. He tapped it twice, just like the waitress had done. In large red letters, the sign read:

"NO CASH SALES; NO REFUNDS! NO TRADE, NO PLAY!"

"But that's crazy."

The Gatekeeper winked, then pointed to several gold and silver wrist watches dangling loosely on his outstretched arm. He modeled them

next to his clown face like a game-show princess.

Rup caught the hint. He removed his digital-display Timex, a twenty-two-dollar watch he recently won in a pool game. He handed it over reluctantly.

The Wabbit held the watch to a lamp on the desk and examined it with a jeweler's loupe. "This won't do," the Wabbit frowned and wrinkled his nose. He held the watch by the end of the band like a dead fish. "It's icky."

Rupert shrugged his shoulders.

"What about that?" The Wabbit pointed to the ring on Rupert's finger.

"No way. That's the Kiss of GodWabbit. It ain't for trade."

The Gatekeeper raised his right hand, extending the middle finger to Rupert's face. "Fuck you Peter." He then dropped the middle finger and exchanged it for his thumb--pointing the way to the gate. "Abandon all hope you sexy bastard, and enter with great moral trepidation."

"Say what?"

"It's a have-to Peter. Company policy."

"Yeah, whatever." Rupert watched the Gatekeeper spin around on his stool and throw the watch into a trash bin. He then pumped two squirts of hand sanitizer onto his hands and walked ten feet to the club side of the vault. Once there, he grabbed an iron lever protruding from the wall and pulled.

The gate opened.

As Rupert stepped into the club. He was immediately surrounded by a mass of strippers, most female, but several were men wearing Speedos. They groped and squeezed like he was a visiting rock star.

"Let me take it for you baby." a big-breasted brunette whispered, as she clung to his side, sticking her tongue into his ear.

"The back door's here Peter," offered one of the glitter-faced men.

But Rupert didn't slow. He pushed his way through the flesh until he arrived at Sydney's table.

Sydney extended his hand to Rupert, a bump of the knuckles was their

customary greeting. "Rup ... where you been man? I been waiting here for hours. You wouldn't wake up."

Rupert left his brother's hand hanging and pulled out a chair. He sat directly across from Sid and the two girls and spotted the bag immediately, tucked between two cushions beside Sid and the red-head. "Okay Red, get your ass off my duffel bag."

"Why don't you move this ass yourself Cowboy? I can do you both at the same time.... You know?"

Rupert lunged at the bag-- ripping it quickly from the couch.

"Golly Rup. What's wrong? You mad at me or something?"

"What do you think Sid?" He pulled the bag's zipper open and reached inside.

"Somebody's got a big surprise," the Red Head said with a long Southern Georgia drawl. "I think you're gonna like it."

"I hope you do Rup. The girls helped me get it for you."

"He'll love it Baby," the Brunette added, as she massaged Sydney's scalp.

"This can't be." He opened the bag wider, trying to peer through the darkness for confirmation. "Where is the jewelry Sydney? WHERE IS MY FUCKING JEWELRY?"

"Don't you like surprises?" the Brunette asked seductively, as she moved away from Sydney and took two steps toward Rupert's chair. She pulled the side zipper of the bag open and motioned for Rupert to look inside.

Rupert pulled a sterling-silver bowie knife with a gold-gilded handle from the compartment. It was a nice blade, but nothing a couple-hundred dollars couldn't buy in a Tijuana flea market.

"I traded some of that junk from the pawnshop to git it for you Rup. It's real gold. Mary-Mary told me so. Ain't that right Mary-Mary?"

Mary-Mary, the red-haired stripper, nodded affirmatively, as she continued massaging Sydney's personal jewels.

Rupert flipped the knife handle in his palm like a circus juggler. "I'm gonna kill you Sydney."

"Hee ... hee ... hee," he laughed, as Mary-Mary and the Brunette joined in. "That's the thing Rup," he smiled, pulling Mary-Mary's hand from his crotch to indicate his seriousness. "You can't die down here."

The Brunette moved to Rupert's lap, sliding her hand inside of his shirt and massaging his back. "My names Alice. I'm a wonderland of delight Baby."

"This place is heaven Rup. You'll see," Sydney continued, bending forward slightly to tap his brother on the knee. "She's pretty ain't she Rup? Why don't you do her?"

"You traded the jewelry for whores Sid?"

"But you can't die here Rup!" Sid's eyes widened. "We're like Jesus in this place Bubba. We don't need money no more."

"You're an idiot."

Alice moved her head to Rup's lap and began to unzip his pants.

"You gonna like what she does Rup. I promise you will."

"We had at least twenty-grand in jewelry. Your telling me that you traded it for a strip-club blow job and some con that you can live forever? I've got news for you little brother. If I don't get my jewelry--right now--you and these two whores won't see another two minutes, much less an eternity."

"Give me the knife Rup. I'll show you."

Alice raised her head from Rupert's lap and looked lustfully at the knife. "Do me this time Sydney," she begged. "You can slide it in nice and slow. I'll scream good for you baby."

"We're leaving," Rup said firmly. He opened the bag in front of the girls and held it between them. "Now you two nursery-rhyme ladies can just drop my shit right here."

"Hee ... hee," Mary-Mary giggled, burying her head into the blubbery fat of Sid's belly. "No refunds Peter. Didn't the Wabbit tell you?"

"How did you know that? There's no way in hell you could know that."

"No baby?" Mary-Mary asked seductively. "I know that you're a born cutter, a blood-thirsty bastard."

"What have you told her Sid?" Rupert squeezed the knife handle. "How

many times have I told you to keep your mouth shut? How many times?"

"Ooh Baby ... your getting' me horny holding that knife so tight," Mary-Mary purred, rolling her tongue over her lips hungrily. "Give me a little slice of that shit.... What do you say?"

"Oh, I'll slice you," Rupert replied, dropping the bag to the floor and pointing the knife at Mary. "I'll make Georgia bacon outta your ass."

"No, it's my turn!" Alice grabbed at Rupert's wrist and tried to pull the knife into her chest.

"Okay Rup," Sid said, interrupting his brother's struggle with Alice. "I'll show you with the revolver, but it's gonna bust me.... Okay?"

"Oh God baby.... Yes!" pleaded Mary.

Sydney drew the revolver and placed the muzzle against Mary-Mary's belly.

He squeezed the--"BOOM ... BOOM ... BOOM"--trigger, three times.

"Mother fuck!" Rup screamed, throwing Alice to the floor and jumping to his feet, the silver knife outstretched for battle.

Blood seeped from the corner of Mary's mouth. Her pupils danced for a moment, then her eyes rolled to the back of her skull. She drooped forward, lifeless on the leopard-skin.

Suddenly the music ceased. The dancing stopped. Dozens--perhaps hundreds--of eyes studied Rupert from the darkness.

He crouched low, grabbing Alice as hostage and pulling her tight. He pressed the knife to her throat and looked into the darkness wild eyed, daring anyone to challenge him.

"Hee ... hee," Alice giggled. "I think I'm gonna cum."

Sydney laughed, a bending-over hard laugh that he could not control. For once, he knew something big-brother Rupert did not.

The music in the club re-started as abruptly as it had stopped.

"This place is insane," Rupert mumbled, stepping backwards and slowly releasing Alice.

"Damn it!" Alice bitched. "I wouldn't charge you much, just the knife

maybe. I thought you was supposed to be a killer."

"You're all fucking insane!" Rupert dropped the knife in disbelief.

But then, Mary-Mary's eyes blinked. Slowly at first, then six or seven times in succession. When her eye lids finally locked opened, the eyeballs spun in her head like a Vegas slot machine.

"Jesus Christ!"

"See Rup ... I told you so." Sid squatted, grabbing the knife from the floor.

Mary-Mary coughed as she recovered, spitting up slimy black-colored phlegm onto Sid's shirt. She tossed her long braided hair to the side, and rubbed her face lovingly against the big man's chest. "Do it again Baby," she moaned. "Kill me again you fat son of a bitch."

"No Sid!" Alice screamed. "You killed her twice already! I've been nice to you ain't I?"

Rupert pinched himself, as he watched his brother hand the Colt revolver to Mary. He felt the sting, but he wasn't convinced.

Sydney, his gun now surrendered, watched intently as a small school of maggots slithered on the surface of Mary-Mary's belly repairing the puncture wounds in her skin. He stuck his finger into one of the holes, scooping several of the worms into his palm. He then placed the ghastly noodles into his pie hole.

Rupert watched as Sydney swallowed the maggots like raw oysters.

"Your turn Baby." Mary-Mary pointed the gun at Sid's head and ... "

"BOOM!"

Rupert lunged for her, quickly snatching the gun from her hand. He pointed the muzzle at at her forehead, squeezing the trigger.

"CLICK."

"Forget something Cutter?"

"You lucky bitch."

"Six. It's my favorite number, especially when it comes before nine."

Rupert threw the empty six-shooter to the floor, taking the knife

from his dead brother's hand and plunging it into Mary's chest. He twisted the handle back and forth, rupturing the heart chamber. He was in no mood for another resurrection.

Mary flinched only slightly.

"You bastard," Alice cursed, as she stomped away from the couch in a high-heeled rage. "If you fuckers don't want to play with me, just say so."

Rupert left the knife impaled in Mary's chest and turned to inspect his brother's injury. The wound was fatal. The projectile had exited the back of his head and blown brain matter onto the carpet.

Rup embraced his brother. "I loved you man," he cried. "You stupid son of a bitch."

But as Rupert mourned, the party in the Box Car continued unabated. "Fire In Your New Shoes," by Kaskade bounced from the walls:

*"Yeah, we're red inside, we're all red inside
And the leg bone's connected to the one in the thigh ... "*

Rupert, his head resting solemnly on Sydney's shoulder, felt a light tingling sensation crawling over his fingertips. As he looked down, he noticed a trail of black maggots climbing over his skin. He stood quickly, shaking the creatures off.

"If you should smile, look so surprised"

"Thump ... thump."

"While I light a fire in your new shoes"

"Thump ... thump."

The maggots oozed from Sydney's head. They were swimming to the music, dancing in rhythm, as they stitched new flesh from the bloody ooze.

"This ain't possible." Rupert walked backwards from the sofa, striking his head with the palm of his hand. "This ain't fucking possible."

"Not good fer your thinking cells Rup," the new-born Sydney said sarcastically. "Momma was a smart bitch wasn't she?"

Rupert nodded his head side to side. He knew this could not be his

brother. "You never talked about Momma like that.... What's gotten into you?"

"Goddamn Rupert. Why did you kill Mary-Mary? She's gonna have all our shit now. You understand that don't you?"

"What?"

"You gotta pay em' when you kill em' dumb ass. They're like fucking death whores."

Mary-Mary's eyes again rolled to life. "I'll take the knife for that one Cutter," she winked. She pulled the silver blade from her gut and wiped it clean on Rupert's shirt. "I haven't been rode this hard in decades."

"Where's the Jewelry? Just give me what's mine, and I'll leave."

"Don't argue," Sid instructed. "The Minions will throw you out. And by out, I mean somewhere you don't want to go."

"Minions?"

"Trust me. There the little dwarf son's of bitches sitting in the corner over there," he said, pointing to a row of six human-body midgets with pig-like snouts for a nose. "They're stronger than they look."

"Minions...? Really...? That's such bullshit. Your dead! You're not even a real person. That bitch on the couch ... I cut her heart into three pieces, fucking mincemeat. Before that, I saw you pump three bullets into her stomach. But she's still breathing! And now ... Minions?"

"You done right Rupert. She tried to hurt me, so you killed her. That's the rule."

"Yeah Sid. It is. And you need to remember the rules right now."

"Calm down Brother. Have a seat. Take in some free air."

"We need to go. NOW!"

"You still got the ring. Right?"

"The ring? Now you want it too?"

"Okay Rup. Just sit down. I'll leave with you. But first, I gotta

take a leak. Don't give the ring to anyone while I'm gone. You understand Rupert?"

CHAPTER FIVE

As Sydney walked into the john, Rupert noticed the neon-illuminated sign blinking above the entrance. It read, "THE SHITTER" in bright red letters spread twenty-feet across the top of the two doors. Below it, the words "Bitches" and "Bastards" replaced the usual ladies-and-gents designation.

Five minutes soon turned to ten, and Rupert's suspicions of his newly resurrected brother grew in intensity. He walked through the bastard's door to investigate and was greeted by a man in a white tuxedo.

"Sir, morning good." The older gentleman spoke with a heavy British accent. He had a square jaw, a long graying ponytail, and the hanging odor of Hai Karate after shave from the 1970's. "Knight Charles Sir am I."

"You're kidding."

Charles, with both hands clad in pristine white gloves, bowed to Rupert, as if royalty had entered the room. Standing upright, he directed Rupert through a series of narrow tunnels leading into the facility.

The two emerged from an arch-shaped corridor into a large chamber exquisitely designed with white-marble tile. The room had four doorways, with three of them highly decorated and marked with large Roman numerals.

Rupert was pleased that the music could no longer be heard. With the exception of their own footsteps, the white room was void of distracting noise.

"The Box Car is proud to offer three fine choices in assisted waste elimination."

"I don't want to hear this Charles."

"Sir, options your consideration please?" Charles directed Rupert's attention to three gold-enameled doorways. "Booth number one is of Anglo-Indian design and allows for the proper squatting required for a self-satisfying defecation. It is quite popular with our non-WASP visitors."

"Yeah, whatever James. I'm glad to see that you can talk straight, but how many times do I have to tell you wonderland bastards that I'm only here to get my brother? Nothing else. Now how about you stop this silly bullshit and get to the point Mr. James, Wild Bill, Sir Charles, or whatever your name is this time. Cause I'm getting damned irritated with all of you."

"Booth number two is staffed by our proctologist technician. He will gently assist you with a colonic irrigation that will vacate you like never before. This procedure is simply marvelous for stress reduction and the clarity of one's inner Qi."

"Not interested ... never liked enemas. He's a big guy. HE JUST CAME IN. You couldn't have missed him."

"Hmm ... yes. Well. And finally sir, booth number three is a simple U.S.-style flush apparatus. I am sure that you are familiar with this contemporary domestic dilly.... Am I correct sir?"

Rupert grabbed the White Knight by his bow tie, pushing him against the wall. "Look you British-faced faggot, I'm not here to use the facilities. And I don't want to hear another word about toilets. All I want to hear coming out of that pussy-ass mouth is where my little brother is. Do you understand me Charley?"

He nodded.

Rupert released his hold.

"Sir understand you, stay may one not unless value has he."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, management skills trade I for trinkets. Perhaps ring golden your?"

"No asshole. What does it mean for my brother?"

"Scrubber fecal is he now. Trade no had he. Bad very is this."

"Show me."

"Sir?"

"Show me. Now."

Charles pointed to the small door in the corner. It was marked, "Janitorial--Employees Only."

Rupert opened the door and was pulled inside by a strong vacuum of heated air. He stumbled down seven stairs and landed upright in a patch of barren dirt. He stood, brushing dirt from his jeans, and noticed the area to his left was directly under the toilet facilities.

The room was a large cave, as big as several city blocks. A small dark-colored river ran through the middle of the enclosure. It glowed an illuminating black that Rup had never encountered. The luminescence was of such brightness that it bounced from the ceiling and walls and lit the entire enclosure with a near-ultraviolet light.

Three naked men toiled knee deep in fecal muck shoveling puree around with their bare hands. A fourth man stood under the toilets holding a large bowl and waiting for the next discharge of black liquid.

"Need shit Mister?" a pig-nosed minion asked matter-of-factly. The four-foot tall minion wore white overalls stained to the waist in human feces and was holding a pitch fork like a military rifle.

"What is this place? This is horrid."

"He-oink, he-oink," the Minion laughed, with the sound of a kicking jackass. "It's heaven if you need shit Peter."

"That's not my name."

"He-oink ... he-oink ... oink oink."

"Rupert! Help me!"

Rupert looked behind the Minion toward the sound of the voice. Behind the men under The Shitter, he saw a vast processing field with dozens of large mounds of human excrement. Human figures crawled through the mounds like worms. One of the figures was Sydney.

"Over here Rup! Hurry!" Sydney waved frantically. He was naked and covered with the oil-like paste from head to toe.

The men crawled through the mounds on their hands and knees, and Rupert surmised that they were processing the excrement by pressing it, much like grapes are pressed into wine.

"Rup ... you gotta get me outta here!"

"Yes," the short Minion said, encouraging Rupert to take action. "Help your brother escape the slime. Don't you love him? Don't you

love him so much, it hurts you? He-oink ... oink."

"The Patsy Cline song," Rupert thought. "This has to be a set up."

Has the men pressed the waste into black liquid, it oozed down a series of concrete gulleys and flowed into the fluorescent blackness of the river.

Sydney continued crawling through the soup, waving to Rupert as best he could.

"He had nothing to trade, nothing to trade," the Minion squealed in a high-pitched voice. "Work he will ... uh huh."

"Give him the ring Rup! Jesus, I'm dying out here!"

"Of course. Of course. Freedom for the ring ... the Kiss yes. Me wants the Kiss; set him free I will."

Rupert took one last look. Then ... he turned his back.

"Rupert, give him the damn ring! You're not gonna leave me in this shit hole are you...? Rup?"

"He-oink ... he-oink ... oink oink! Back to work! Back to work!" the Minion laughed, as he threatened Sydney with the sharp end of the fork.

Rupert fought his way through the sucking back-wind of the lower level and pushed through the exit door. He navigated through The Shitter and emerged once again into the main room of the Box Car Pawn.

"Fire in Your New Shoes" still reverberated through the air with its hypnotic beat, as Rupert stood in a dark corner planning his escape.

There was a tap upon his shoulder.

"Give it to me Peter!" Alice held out her hand. "You cheated me you know. I spent time with you. You owe me."

He started to push her aside, but it was too late. The other eyes were closing in upon him now. He felt their bodies pressing against his skin.

"For the ring," the voices repeated. "Give me the ring."

Rupert knew he would need a distraction. He pulled the ring from his

finger and held it in his palm for all to lust.

Alice reached for the prize with both hands.

He gripped the ring like a miniature baseball and threw it to the other side of the Club with all of his might. "There! Take the damn ring you fucking devils!"

The demons scurried toward the ring like frenzied dogs, crawling, climbing, clawing with their perfect fingernails for anything that glittered in the darkness.

Rupert, palm-cupping the ring with his thumb, closed his hand into a fist and sprinted through the empty maze of chairs and tables toward the front of the club. He reached the entrance gate and pushed it hard. Nothing moved. He kicked it; but the frame didn't budge.

Rup jumped the small banister separating the gate from the rear door of the Rabbit's box-car. He crashed into the back wall of the car in full stride and began knocking on the door frantically.

The Wabbit responded slowly to the knock. His dog-chain trailing noisily behind him on the overhead slide.

"I need help Roger," Rupert said through a barred window in the door. "Hurry a bit would you?"

"Peter ... my dear Timex boy. Why aren't you having fun with the girls?"

"You still want the ring?" He pressed his face against the steel. "I'll give it to you. I promise; I'll give it to you."

The Wabbit studied his nervousness and sensed opportunity.

Rupert displayed the ring in the window. "Just open the gate. It's all yours."

"Oh my ... so that's why everyone is crawling on the floor. You're such a bad bad boy."

Rupert stroked the linking hearts encircling the ring. It was a sale he had to make.

"Sorry Peter, but nobody leaves the Box Car. You remember don't you? Abandon all hope and such. You did, after all, pay for your entry Snookums."

"You threw the watch away!"

"Yeah, I remember. It was Ickified. But nonetheless, you paid."

"Fine, just let me in the office Roger. They're going to kill me."

"You wanna fuck Peter?" The Wabbit asked, clicking the six-inch heels of his black vinyl boots together like a teenage girl needing a piss. "For the ring. You know, a fair trade?"

"Just let me in man. I'll do anything you want you bipolar bastard."

The Wabbit eyeballed the minions. They were watching the lesser demons as the search continued near the back of the bar. "Okay," he said with a sly grin and unlocked the door. "But hurry lover. They mustn't see you."

Rupert stepped into the vault and embraced the frail-figured Wabbit.

"That's right Bitch. Now give me the ring."

"Not till I get what I want," Rupert teased, putting the ring back onto his finger and dropping to his knees. He pressed his face tightly against the Wabbit's white-sparkle body suit and covertly studied the demon's platform shoes from the corner of his eye. "It just might work," he thought, as he estimated the height of the cork soles and rehearsed the move in his head.

"You're a kinky bastard, aren't you Peter?"

Rupert, his hands already caressing the back of the Wabbit's thighs, lowered the massaging motion slowly until his fingertips were upon the vinyl edge of the Wabbit's platforms.

"What are you doing?"

Suddenly, with the speed of a skilled knife killer, Rupert simultaneously unzipped both shoes with a single thrust.

"Peter?"

Grunting, Rupert grabbed the bottom of the Gatekeeper's heels and yanked them upward.

The Wabbit's feet were tossed toward the ceiling in a violent backwards spin. Halfway into the rotation, the brass collar snatched his neck like an executioner's gallows, whipping his thin body to and fro like a pendulum to some bizarre clown clock.

Rupert jumped to his feet, seizing the Wabbit's waist and spinning the frail man clockwise to tighten the chain tethered to his collar. It quickly formed knots in the links, raising the height at which the Rabbit was suspended.

Now dangling two feet from the floor, the Wabbits' eyes bulged within their sockets.

Rupert snatched the decorative iron spike from the Gatekeeper's hair, sliding it through two links of knotted chain and locking it firmly into place.

Roger's arms and legs flailed wildly as Rupert released the embrace and pushed him to the end of the vault. Rup then ran to the gate control arm and pulled it firmly.

The control arm didn't move.

Roger muster a slight smile, as he choked.

Rupert grabbed the Wabbit's metal stool and used it as a pry bar on the lever.

The stool leg snapped from the force.

He slammed the stool onto the handle like a hammer, pounding it over and over from every angle.

Nothing worked.

"Thud."

Rupert felt the impact to his head at the same time his ass collided with the floor. And it hurt.

The Demon had used his legs to push off the wall and slide across the room like an out-of-control cable car. The speed of the sliding assault had made his frail body a powerful projectile.

Rupert--slightly dazed--stood quickly, again grabbing the Gatekeeper by the waist. He flung the Demon against the iron wall and watched him bounce--landing ass-first on top of the gate lever.

With the impact of the Wabbit's derriere, the lever fell, and the gate began to open.

Rupert punched the Gatekeeper's gut to stun him, then pushed the Wabbit against the far wall. He moved the remains of the bar stool to the middle of the box car, betting the damaged stool would slow

another attempt at a flying assault.

He opened the rear door slowly.

And from the darkness they came.

Rupert vaulted the banister in a sprint and dove for the gate opening, hoping for a long slide to carry him through.

Behind him, flesh impacted steel and rock and silenced the club's music with a resounding boom. The overhead lights flickered, and a gritty rock dust sprinkled through the air like falling snow.

The gate had closed behind him, but the demons still reached for him through the narrow channels of the iron bars, their fingertips inches from his body.

"Take me with you Peter," Alice pleaded, pressing her body against the steel. "Take my hand. Pull me through."

"Fuck, her," Mary-Mary interrupted. "Take me. I'm a killer's woman. You know you want it."

A lone minion, with sinewy muscles that rivaled those in Rupert's arms, approached the gate behind Alice. He flung her aside. The others, silenced with fear, circled the pig-man as he centered himself in the gateway.

Rupert rolled to his back, noticing the Minion approach. "Fuck you Piglet!" he cursed, bringing his middle finger to eye level.

The Minion opened the gate effortlessly.

Rupert crawled backwards in retreat.

But the red-eyed Minion did not advance.

"When you return Rupert T. Miller, you'll beg me to suffocate you in the Shit Fields of Acheron."

"So now you know my name?" Rupert asked, as he climbed from the floor and brushed dust from his clothing.

"Oink ... he-oink ... he-oink!"

Rupert walked to the elevator shaft and pressed the service button.

The Minion rubbed his snout, his wrinkles beginning to relax from laughter. "You're in hell Homosapien. There is no escape."

"But I ain't dead," Rupert replied, punching the elevator service button again.

But the elevator responded no better than the gate lever had.

"You're dead enough. You stink of hell."

Rupert turned his attention to the old bum still sitting motionless in the middle of the corridor. He circled the man cautiously and noticed a dried blood stain on his shirt. With his boot, he nudged the man's leg lightly. "You okay old man?"

CHAPTER SIX

The old man raised his head, just enough to speak, but not enough for Rup to get a good look. Stringy gray hair fell across his eyes, and he raised his left hand, waiting patiently for Rupert to take it.

"Do I know you Mister?" Rupert asked, as he pulled the man to his feet.

Rupert was met with a stare, one he had not forgotten.

The old man held his right hand--still missing the ring finger--in front of the Cutter's face. "I told you I would see you in hell."

"Jesus Christ!"

"No boy. I'm Aedan Kane."

Rupert's jaw dropped. He took two steps back, nodding in disbelief. "But I ain't dead yet. I know I ain't dead yet."

Kane held out his hand and opened his palm.

"You want the ring don't you?"

"It wasn't meant for you."

"But it's the only thing keeping me alive in here."

"I know its power. But it's not yours."

"Is it really the Kiss of God?"

"It is the Kiss that carries one's spirit with the promise of love."

Rupert pulled the ring from his finger and handed it to Kane.

Kane squeezed it tightly. "And now, in this place of purgatory and trial, perhaps even you will find redemption."

"You fool," the Minion scolded from fence edge. "You've given away the only innocence you had."

"My hatred for you has doomed me to this place," Kane explained.

"But I killed you Mister."

"Nonetheless, I'm at your mercy once more. It is only your forgiveness that will release my bondage to this crypt."

Rupert nodded, accepting Kane's request.

Kane supported himself upon Rupert's shoulder, as he struggled across the corridor to the elevator. He pressed the service button.

The door opened.

Inside the elevator Rupert saw a beautiful young woman, her golden hair was crowned with a beret of yellow roses. A hazy mist surrounded her body as she moved gracefully to the doorway.

"Abby?" Aedan asked.

She smiled at her father softly and offered her hand through the doorway.

"Hey Mister. What about me?"

"I hold no malice for you, but I fear many others do. You must find your peace, or your soul will fall here."

"Can I go with you?"

Kane reached out.

"You can't do that you cow bitch!" the Minion yelled from the fence. "You don't have authority here! He paid his entry! He belongs here! Hee-oink!"

Rupert stepped into the elevator. The doors closed, and the floor rattled and shook as it climbed.

As the three ascended, Rupert noticed that the haze surrounding Abigail was now beginning to form around Kane.

"Am I dead?" Rupert asked the Angel Abigail.

"Time is short for you, and your Kiss is far away from here. When the door opens, hesitate not. For your pace must be swifter than the white rabbit."

"But, I ... "

And the door opened.

Rupert was sucked out of the car by a powerful force that did not affect the Angel or her father. His body was flew through the air, slamming head first onto the floor of the Box Car Diner.

Rupert saw the big Cook running toward him. The four-inch switchblade steady in his hand.

"Mother fucker," the Cook yelled, as he dove onto Rupert trying to stab him.

But Rupert rolled right, avoiding the Cook's dive and crawling to his feet to run.

The Cook lunged at Rupert's boot, snagging it. He pulled The Cutter back, preventing escape.

The Waitress ran toward the melee, kicking Rupert in the face. "You ain't going nowhere bastard!" she yelled, as she grabbed a cup of hot coffee and threw it into his eyes.

Blinded by the boiling black, Rupert continued to fight off the attackers by tactile feel. He rolled to his back and then to his front, yanking hard on the boot the Cook still held with both hands. Somehow, Rupert slid his foot from the shoe, and he broke free. With his arms blindly leading the way, he ran full speed toward the exit door, leaving the boot behind.

"Get him Dick!" she screamed, as Rupert crashed through the door headfirst.

But Rupert escaped fate once again. He hobbled through the parking lot rapidly and soon fell into a patch of soft desert sand. With his pulse racing, he rubbed his eyes clear and noticed a large yucca plant a few feet away. He scurried to the tree and collapsed behind it.

No one followed.

Rupert planted his head against the yucca and rested. As his breathing returned to normal, he closed his eyes and wondered what the Angel had meant when she said his Kiss was far away. His eyes soon grew heavy and sleep enveloped his flight.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rupert awoke to a sky starless and dark. He rolled to his belly slowly and covertly scanned the area for signs of the Cook or pig-nosed Minions. But there was something very strange about the landscape. The Diner had disappeared. Even the yucca tree he had slept under had vanished from the desert.

"It was a dream," Rupert realized, taking a deep breath to calm his nerves. He pinched his forearm to confirm reality, and again--he felt the sting. He wondered how a nightmare could be so realistic, so terribly frightening. "I must have been drugged," he thought. "But Sid wouldn't leave me like this. Something must have happened to him."

Blue and yellow lights flickered on the hillside a short distance away, and Rupert was glad to see them. He pulled off his remaining boot, tossed it aside, and began to walk toward the lights in white athletic socks. "I swear I'll never kill again," he mumbled. "Unless'n they deserve it of course."

As he moved closer, Rupert could see that the rotating yellow lights came from a tow truck hooking up to a damaged station wagon. It looked a lot like his old Chevy. "Hey Dude! That's my car!"

The driver never heard Rupert, and he drove off with the Wagon in tow.

Rup tripped on a jagged rock as he reached the base of the hillside and fell into a drainage ditch of loose sediment. As he climbed to his feet, he noticed a faint glimmer of light reflecting from a small scrub brush a few feet away. It was the duffel bag.

"Son of a bitch!" Rup scurried over and grabbed the bag. He recognized the weight immediately. It was all there.

"Hey Tom!" a voice yelled from above. "Bring the defibrillator! I've got a live one, but his pulse is weak!"

Rupert looked up the hillside. He figured the voices were coming from cops, but they hadn't seen him yet. He hugged the giant bag in his arms and scampered through the gulley searching for a soft spot. He found a pile of loose sand behind a large boulder and began digging with his hands immediately.

"Beep-beep ... Two-Forty-Seven, Two-Forty-Seven," a police radio blared loudly from the highway. "Confirm a Sixty-six with injury Route 90,

marker 1331 West, Roger? Beep-beep."

Rupert lay the jewelry into the hole and concealed it with loose sand. To mark the spot, he pulled his shirt off and tied it to a cactus branch a few feet away.

"That's affirmative," a male voice replied to the radio transmission. "Respond med-vac STAT. I repeat ... STAT. Coordinates for the chopper are within the old train crash site. Roger that Dispatch?"

"Beep-beep ... 10-4 Two-Forty-Seven. Stand by. Beep-beep."

Rupert began to realize he and Sydney must have been involved in an accident. "That explains everything," he thought, as he pushed himself from his knees and began to walk up the hill.

"One, and two ... and one, and two," the policeman counted, as his latex-gloved hands pushed rhythmically into the victim's chest. He was trying to keep the victim's blood flowing until the Defib Unit arrived.

"Here you go Billy," Tom yelled from above. "I charged it on the run. You're ready to go."

Texas Ranger William Schemburger--known to his partner as Billy--took the electronic defibrillator from his partner and began to separate the electrodes.

"I don't know Billy. This guy looks pretty bad. His head is cut to hell and back."

An electronic voice spoke evenly from the machine.

"Open airway ... Check breathing ... Place electrode on upper chest."

Schemburger followed the instructions. He had completed the procedure several times before, and he knew the importance of working fast.

"Hey!" Rupert yelled, as he neared the roadway. "Hey guys...! Over here!"

"Don't touch patient. Analyzing."

Rupert reached the blacktop and saw that the Rangers were struggling to save the life of a shirtless male supine on the edge of the roadway. There was also a dull yellow light glowing beside them that was growing in intensity and forming the shape of an active vortex.

"Hey, Officer!" He was close to them now, just a few steps away. But still, they did not acknowledge his presence.

The light grew taller now. It flickered like a candlelight, then transformed into a translucent image of the Angel Abigail.

"No. No way.... You're not real."

But Rupert could not wish her away. Abigail hovered above the ground at the head of the dying man. She wore her Kiss as a golden pendant in a hemp-strung necklace, and held a beautiful bouquet of yellow sunflowers in her hands.

Rupert was ashamed to look upon her.

Abigail, her eyes glistening with tears that would not fall, looked down upon the dying man, and dropped the bouquet upon his chest. Many of the flowers had broken stems or missing petals. "I picked them for you Rupert. For they are, what you could have become."

"That's not ... It's not me. Is it?"

Abigail nodded slightly, the look of hurt in her face speaking the words for her.

"But it can't be." He looked at the clothing the man wore, then at his own. The man wore blue jeans, a pair of white athletic socks, and no shirt.

Identical.

Don't touch patient. Press treatment button."

Rupert watched the officers as they moved in a reality that was no longer his. They didn't notice the sunflower bouquet. Their hands moved through it like a mist.

"Sometimes," Abigail said softly, "A soul falls to this place before the thread of life is cut."

Schemburger depressed the red button, sending a shock through Rupert's dying body.

"Treatment delivered. Beep!"

The sunflowers began to wither and wilt.

"What do you want from me? I thought everything was okay now."

"Your covetous delay was not wise. The Kiss of God waits for no man's greed."

The flowers turned brown.

"But I thought it was a dream."

"It's no good Tom," William said, flinging the power switch off in frustration. "He's gone."

"No!" Rupert reached for the shoulder of Ranger Schemburger, only to see his hand go through the man unnoticed. "No try again! Try again!"

"The thread has been severed," Abigail said sadly, as the flowers turned to black ash. "God's promise for you lives no more." And with those words, the Angel lowered her head, joined her hands around the ring and faded into the starless night.

"That's it? You're just going to leave me here?"

"I'm going to remove the jewelry. It may help with ID later." The Ranger reached to his utility belt and pulled out a sterling-silver bowie knife with a gold-gilded handle.

"Hey, that's the ... " Rupert began, but a tremor of fear prevented him from finishing.

Schemburger, now appearing much smaller than before, grabbed the left wrist of Rupert's dead body. He held the limp hand firmly upon the surface of the road and ... "Chomp" ... cut the ring finger off.

"That ... that ... it's...."

"What is it Peter?" the Ranger asked, his voice now carrying a familiar feminine lisp.

"Oh Christ no." Rupert dropped to his knees. "CHRIST NO!"

The Officer turned to face Rupert. Strands of green hair were falling from the edges of the Ranger's Hat, and his gloss-white skin reflected the blue and white of the rotating police lights. He held the severed finger in his perfectly manicured hand and displayed it.

Rupert vomited. Each spasm ending with the same surreal reality.

"A deal is a deal Peter. And this ring--as you well know--was promised for services rendered."

"He-oink ... he-oink," laughed the other Texas Ranger. "Stole it he did...! Stole it from an angel! He-oink, oink."

"You're not real!" Rupert banged his head with his palms repetitively. "None of you are!"

"He-oink ... he-oink," the muscular Minion grunted, dancing like a child, as he spun his body in circles on the blacktop.

"Oh Lover," the Wabbit purred, as he pulled the Kiss from the severed finger and began to lick it clean. "Such a pretty-pretty ring you've traded for my little pussy."

"I was forgiven for taking it. You can't do this to me now."

"Run Rupert, run!" the Wabbit teased, placing both hands to his face in a mocking gesture of the Angel Abigail. "Your Kiss awaits you far far away!"

"He-oink, oink ... taste the kiss of hell. Taste it he will."

"Oh Peter Baby, my kiss is so much yummiier than hers. Once you taste it, I just know you'll remember it forever."

"No. NO!" Rupert tried to run ... tried to move his legs, but they were paralyzed with fear.

"Don't try to fight it Pete," the Wabbit soothed, as he walked closer to Rupert, placing his left hand on his neck and squeezing lightly. "This is the kiss you've been waiting for your whole life. Why, ever since you killed the neighbor's cat, you've had faith in dark love, in hopelessness, despair, and cruelty. You knew this day would come."

"Uh huh ... You knew it; you did! Hee-oink oink!"

The Wabbit squeezed Rupert's neck harder and held the point of the silver knife against his chest, just penetrating the skin.

Rupert's eyes widened.

He pushed it deeper.

Rupert felt alive. He felt cold stainless steel cutting through his flesh, severing his arteries and piercing his beating heart.

The Wabbit twisted the handle back and forth Cutter-style and waited for the sucking and gurgling to begin. "Is this how it's done

Rupert?"

Rupert felt his legs collapse under him. He dangled in the air by the neck, as the Wabbit's grip lifted. The liquid filled his lungs now, drowning him in blood.

"Intoxicating it is! Intoxicating, he-oink, oink!"

"I ... I didn't know...."

"You can feel it leaving you. Can't you Mister?" the Wabbit teased with further mockery. "All hope that is?"

Rupert coughed blood onto the manicured nails of the Gatekeeper. He wanted to die so badly, but hell would not allow it.

The Rabbit's body grew taller and stronger as Rupert withered under his grasp. His skin slithered and crawled with the fur-like larvae of *Lucilia Caesar*, and his eyes became serpent-like, with elliptical pupils that refused to blink.

"I am the Deceiver of The Acheron," the Rabbit Demon spoke, as his voice deepened and reverberated throughout the valley below them. He pulled Rupert's face to his own. "You will toil in this box for eternity."

And Rupert tasted the demon's kiss.

A swirling pool of maggots swam from the Rabbit's mouth, infecting Rupert with the slithering disease of the damned. He slung Rupert to the ground and turned to the Minion with instruction. "Begin his birthing."

"He-oink, oink. Acheron cometh! Acheron cometh! Time to go. Time to go it is." The Pig Man began rolling his body on the ground beside Rupert until a small depression formed in the sand.

The worms of the infestation clawed within him, sucking moisture from his body and forming cankerous sores. His skin dried and cracked like parched earth, and a spider web of deep fissures dug into his chest.

"I shall call him Peter," the Deceiver announced, as he released his hold upon the nascent demon's neck. "He shall be a Disciple of the River, and his color shall be green."

"Water?" Rupert begged, as he collapsed to the ground. "Please, just a drop."

"Water? Hee-oink, there's no water fool, only the Acheron. And you shall call it brother."

The earth rattled with the pitter-patter clawing of thousands of tiny feet. To Rupert's left, a wave of black mice carpeted the desert floor in a sea of black fur. The vermin fled by the millions from a small hole under the depression the Minion had formed.

The mice ran furiously in all directions, frantically trying to escape the advance of the black liquid now cresting the surface of the Minion's shallow well.

Rupert rolled to his chest, hoping to bathe in the fluid as it's tentacles encircled him. "Just a drop," he prayed.

"Green turd! Green turd you are! Hee-oink! Oink!"

The Acheron Tributary enveloped him in a sticky pool of waste. The material soaked its way through his department-store socks and blue-denim jeans, then continued to saturate the dried remnants of his once-human skin.

Rup pushed hard against the earth, trying to raise his torso above the sticky goo.

"Hee-oink ... hee-oink." The Minion stripped the Ranger clothing from his body and cast it aside. "Turd's in the shitter! Turd's in the shitter! Hee-oink."

Slowly, Rupert pushed his torso free. But the glue-like feces clung to his legs and arms with unrelenting force. The fibrous tentacles of the river continued to edge higher and higher onto his body. "Please! I'll do anything.... Don't take me!"

"But didn't you come for your brother, Peter?"

Grisly hands--black as the darkness they emerged from--reached through the shallow flow of the Acheron and grabbed Rupert by his ankles. The hands were strong and unrelenting.

"Anything!" Rupert pleaded, as he struggled against the force tugging him under. "I have jewels ... a bag full!"

"Of course you do; you do," the Minion stuttered, as he rolled in the muck like a piglet in his favorite sty. "Bushy tailed and bright eyed you are.... You are, uh-huh."

Rupert, unable to escape the powerful grip, rolled to his buttocks and pushed downward with his arms. The river reached his chin now,

and he arched his head backward to keep the liquid from entering his mouth.

"Turd's in the shitter! They are! Brothers they be! Hee oink oink...."

"Ah, my brother's keeper," the Rabbit sighed, as he placed his maggot-filled hand upon Peter's head. "It looks like you have finally found little Sydney. I suppose it's like you told us. You always get what you want in this world." And he pushed the last vestige of Peter the Green into the mire, to float in the River of Woe for eternity.

"Oh Master, he-oink! What have you done?"

The Rabbit looked at the Minion. "That's not what I meant fool."

But the dark earth trembled nevertheless.

"What he wants, hee-oink. He always gets it, he does. Hee-oink! Oink!"

And climbing upon the slimy back of his demon brother, The Green One of Acheron was birthed.

A thunderous crackling echoed through the dark sky, and Peter's eyes awakened as a sentient new Lord of the Underworld.

The Unholy Rabbit retreated, his hands squeezing upon his own worm-filled head.

Peter the Green's growth unfolded rapidly, the olive-drab scales of his glistening skin stretching taught upon a burgeoning sinewy muscularity. "That's very bad for your thinking cells," the giant spoke in a nasal bass monotone.

The Deceiver looked upon the towering beast, a damnation of his own creation mocked him.

"All that you have Rabbit, I shall take."

"Take it all he will. Hee-oink! Hee-oink! He wants it all!"

The Rabbit twitched, his form reverting to a frail humanoid condition. "But I shall serve you Master, show the way."

"Hare, hare, I send the care. For despite your redeeming kiss, you shall do as all rabbits do. You shall burrow the fields."

“But I'm the Gatekeeper.”

“The Rabbit may keep his collar. But the Fecal Shores of Acheron shall be his vault, and the White Knight's porcelain shall anchor his wretched chain.”

Spirits Black arrived from the rivers Styx, Lethe, Phlegethon, and Cocytus to welcome the Reign of Peter the Green.

And that which Rupert T. Miller wants, The Green Demon shall have.

Ezekiel 17:24

And all the trees of the field shall know that I the LORD have brought down the high tree, have exalted the low tree, have dried up the green tree, and have made the dry tree to flourish: I the LORD have spoken and have done *it*.