

# **Dead Dames Don't Sing**

**Bibliomysteries**

**by John B. Harvey, 1938-**

**Published: 2016**

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Once upon a time Jack Kiley lived over a bookshop in Belsize Park. Nights he couldn't sleep, and there were many, he'd soft foot downstairs and browse the shelves. Just like having his own private library. Patrick Hamilton, he was a particular favorite for a while, perversity in the seedier backstreets of pre-

war London: *The Siege of Pleasure, Hangover Square*. Then it was early Graham Greene, Eric Ambler, Gerald Kersh. He was four chapters into *Night and the City* when the envelope, pale blue and embossed across the seal, was slipped beneath his door. Notice to quit. The shop was being taken over by a larger concern and there were alternative plans for the building's upper floors that didn't include having a late-fortyish private detective, ex-Metropolitan police, as tenant. Kiley scoured the pages of the local press, skimmed the Internet, made a few calls: the result, two rooms plus a bathroom and minuscule kitchen above a charity shop in a less buoyant part of north London, namely Tufnell Park. If not exactly low rent, it was at least affordable. Just. And no more a true park than its upscale neighbor.

Having to pass through the shop on his way upstairs, Kiley's eye grew used to picking out the occasional bargain newly arrived on the rail: a v-necked sweater from French Connection, forty percent cashmere; a pair of black denim jeans, by the look of them barely worn, and fortuitously his size, 36" waist, 32" inside leg. The book section was seldom to his taste, too many discarded copies of J. K. Rowling and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, whereas the ever-changing box of CDs offered up the more than occasional gem. A little soul, late '50s Sinatra, Merle Haggard, a little jazz. He was listening to *Blues with a Reason*, Chet Baker, when his mobile intervened.

"Jack? I'm across the street at Bear and Wolf if you'd care to join me."

Kiley pressed stop on the stereo and reached for his shoes.

Bear and Wolf was an upscale coffee shop with more than half an eye on the growing number of affluent couples and laptop-toting singles newly moved into the area, the women unstylishly stylish in a cool kind of way, the men mostly tall and bulky and distinguished by their lumberjack shirts and metrosexual beards.

Kiley made his way past the workaholics hot-desking at the front table and, pausing at the counter just long enough to order a flat white, ran the gauntlet of buggies and small children to where Kate Keenan was sitting, an oasis of apparent calm around her, in the furthest corner. Kate looking unimpeachable in a dark linen trouser suit and cream shirt, dark hair framing her face as she smiled.

"So, Jack. Long time, no see."

It had been a month or so back, a private view for an exhibition of Saul Leiter photographs at the Photographers' Gallery, Kate there to do a piece for *The Independent*, one of the last before the print edition of the paper folded. Kiley had liked the photos, the color shots especially, but felt uneasy in the crowd. After twenty minutes he'd made his excuses and left.

"Been keeping busy, I trust?" Kate asked now.

"Not so you'd notice."

"Don't tell me things in the PI business are slowing down?"

Kiley shrugged. Kate liked to tease him in a good-natured way about his late-chosen profession, referring to it with appropriate hard-boiled inflections, as if he were some combination of Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, instead of an ex-copper who'd once played soccer in the lower leagues and now spent his time investigating dodgy insurance claims, snooping on behalf of a local firm of solicitors or shadowing errant wives.

“Only if you’re not overburdened, there might be something I could pass your way.”

“And here was I thinking this wasn’t going to be business but pleasure.”

“Can’t it be both?”

“Not recently.”

An eyebrow was raised. “You shouldn’t keep walking out on me so early.”

“It’s not you, it’s just ...”

“The company I keep? Too arty, too cerebral for a down-to-earth guy like you?”

“Too up themselves, don’t forget that.”

Kate laughed. “Jack, you’re so full of shit.”

“Difference is, I know it.”

Whatever response Kate had lined up was halted by the arrival of Kiley’s flat white, the shape of a left-leaning heart traced through the cream on the surface.

“Why do we argue all the time, Jack?” Kate asked, after Kiley had taken his first approving taste.

“It stops us jumping all over one another?”

Leaning forward, she brushed her fingers across the back of his hand. “In that case, couldn’t we agree not to argue for the next hour or so?”

Kiley was looking quizzically at his watch. “You do realize it’s eleven-forty in the morning?”

“You could always drink that slowly. Then it’ll be afternoon.”

When Jack awoke Kate was lying with one leg stretched across the back of his, the other angled up towards her chest. Supple for a woman gradually edging closer to fifty than forty, Jack thought. All that yoga, he supposed. Pilates. In the half-light that filtered through the blinds, the skin at the curve of her shoulder shone with a roseate glow.

Kiley’s bladder insisted he slide himself free and when he returned Kate was sitting up against the pillows, legs crossed at the ankles, elbows resting on her knees.

“Tea?” Kiley said.

“Tea.”

“Builders’ okay?”

“Builders’ is fine.”

While the kettle was boiling, he set the Chet Baker back on but, seeing Kate’s frown, changed it for some Chopin nocturnes he’d brought up from downstairs on a whim and not yet played.

“Is your shower working?” Kate asked.

“Last time I tried.”

Clean, refreshed, she pulled on one of his t-shirts, a white towel wrapped around her head, and took her tea into the room that served as living room and office both.

“So are you going to tell me now?” Kiley asked. “This proposition you mentioned?”

“You mean now we’ve got the preliminaries out of the way?”

“Exactly.”

“Very well. I’ve a friend who owns a specialist book store. Deals in first editions, original manuscripts, authors’ letters, anything literary that’s collectable and hard to find.”

Pausing, she sipped her tea.

“He’s been offered something which, if it’s kosher, might turn out to be a significant find. At the asking price even something of a bargain.”

“And the problem?”

“He’s been in the business long enough not to trust bargains.”

“What sort of money are we talking here, this manuscript, whatever it is?”

“Well, top end, a draft of a Sherlock Holmes short story in Conan Doyle’s own hand just fetched upwards of \$400,000 at auction in New York. Count down from there. But not too far.”

Kiley pursed his lips.

“This friend...”

“Daniel. Daniel Pike. Most of the serious dealers are in Cecil Court, but, for reasons best known to himself, his shop is in Camden Passage. He’s expecting you this afternoon between three and four. And don’t worry, friend or no friend, it’s not pro bono; he’ll pay usual rates at least.”

Ever since Kate had cajoled him into accompanying her to a screening of *The Big Sleep*, part of a Howard Hawks season at the South Bank, Kiley had entertained the fantasy that all rare book stores were staffed by attractive women with more than a passing resemblance to a young Dorothy Malone. Women who, given some small encouragement, would remove their spectacles, shake down their hair and set the sign on the door to closed.

Not so.

If anything, Daniel Pike bore a passing resemblance to Sidney Greenstreet, but a Greenstreet significantly slimmed down and confined to a wheelchair, white hair straying either side of a jowly face. Propelling himself around from behind his desk, he shook Kiley’s hand firmly enough, then gestured for him to take a seat.

“I don’t know how much Kate has explained,” Pike said in a gravelly voice.

“Beyond the fact that someone’s offered to sell you what you consider to be a dodgy proposition, next to nothing at all.”

“Very well.” Pike eased himself back behind his crowded desk. “How are you on poetry, Jack? Mid-twentieth century, British.”

“Questions like that in the pub quiz, I make my excuses and go for a slash.”

“So, William Pierce, that name doesn’t mean anything?”

Kiley shook his head.

“Hughes, Larkin, Seamus Heaney, they’re the ones most strongly recognized, all dead and gone now, of course. But behind those, Championship, if you like, instead of Premier League, there’s a whole batch of others. Also, mostly passed on. Peter Redgrove. R. S. Thomas. William Pierce. More. Of those, partly because his output was, shall we say, shaky—small collections in even smaller editions—it’s Pierce who’s become the most collectable in recent years and whose reputation has risen accordingly.”

“And it’s one of those small editions you’re wary of buying?”

“Not exactly.” Pike changed position in his chair. “What I’ve been offered is not a volume of poetry, but the manuscript of a novel. A crime novel it’s claimed Pierce

wrote when he was a young man as a means of making money, but which was never published.”

“Never published why?”

“I can’t be certain, but it’s possible he simply changed his mind. He was just beginning to gain some critical recognition and this novel, from what I’ve so far seen—fifty or so pages of typescript—well, let’s say it wouldn’t exactly have endeared him to the literary establishment.”

“Crime novels not ranking high in their estimation.”

“That depends. It’s more the kind of crime novel he opted for. Something along the lines of Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers—the cozy kind where the butler did it with the candlestick in the library—that would have been acceptable. But this seems to be aiming at the more sensational end of the market. Pulp fiction in the style of someone like James Hadley Chase or Peter Cheyney.” Pike smiled. “Hard, fast, and deadly.”

Kiley nodded as if the names were ones he’d recognized. He might have read a Peter Cheyney once, but he couldn’t be sure. Lemmy Caution, was that the character’s name?

“These pages, they’re typed, I imagine?”

“Yes.”

“Doesn’t that make it more difficult to prove they were written by Pierce himself?”

“It would. But in this case roughly a third of the pages I’ve seen have corrections and revisions inserted by hand.”

“Pierce’s hand?”

“Either that or a very accurate copy.”

“Presumably you can check...”

“We can bring in experts, certainly, to testify as to the validity or otherwise of the handwriting, analyze the ink if need be, the age and weight of the paper and so on ...”

“And still not be satisfied?”

“There are other issues, less easy to determine. The provenance of the manuscript, for instance; whether the person wishing to sell it is the rightful owner. Added to which the fact that, so far, I have only that person’s assurance that the remainder of the manuscript actually exists and is in her hands.”

“Her?”

“Alexandra Pierce, the youngest daughter. Younger by quite a long way. Pierce must have been well into his fifties when she was born.”

“And she came to you directly, this Alexandra?”

“Yes. I’ve acted for the family in the past. Some papers of her father’s that were placed with an American university. Letters, mainly. Page proofs of a rare early chapbook. Even so, with something like this which could, if authenticated, command a good deal of money, the more usual path would be to sell it at auction; instead of which Alexandra has suggested I should find a buyer without resorting to the open market.”

“Did she give a reason for wanting to go down that route?”

“As I understand it, she wants to avoid a lot of rigmarole, a lot of fuss. It would be easier, she thinks, more straightforward to deal with me directly instead. Someone she knows she could trust.”

Kiley shifted his chair back a notch. “It sounds as if that trust doesn’t necessarily run both ways.”

“Let’s just say Alexandra’s not the most straightforward of people. Contradictory, you might call her. Impulsive. Not easy to read.”

“And that’s what you’d like me to do? A little close reading? Somewhere between the lines?”

Pike smiled. “Any financial losses aside, in this profession what I can least afford to lose is my reputation. If my personal situation were different, there are steps I would take to ensure, as far as is possible, that what I’m being offered is the real thing. As it is...” He prodded the sides of his wheelchair. “I need someone to be my legs for me. Eyes and ears, too.”

“I understand.”

“Good. And the sooner you can become involved the better. Word about Pierce’s supposed foray into sensational fiction is bound to leak out sooner or later. Rumors of that kind, they’re the pornography of the rare book trade. The first chapters of Plath’s follow-up to *The Bell Jar* that mysteriously disappeared after her suicide; the Hemingway manuscript that was in a suitcase stolen from a train; the Dashiell Hammett novel he wrote somewhere between finishing *The Thin Man* and his death twenty five years later. We believe and don’t believe in equal measure. Always hoping. If *Dead Dames Don’t Sing* is legitimate I’d like to get there ahead of the pack. I just don’t want to move too soon and find my head on the block.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“Thank you. Kate assured me you were most resourceful.” Reaching into one of the desk drawers, Pike lifted out a large envelope and passed it across into Kiley’s hand. “The first fifty pages, Jack. All I’ve so far seen myself. Copies, of course. Enough to give you an idea of what we’re dealing with.” He levered himself around from behind his chair. “I’ll see you out.”

The Passage was heaving with bargain hunters and the merely curious, a miscellany of languages rising on the air. Some old Dylan song from *Highway 61* was playing from the used vinyl store across the way. Kiley shook Pike’s hand and crossed towards the alley that would take him towards Islington Green. “If you’re not doing anything later,” Kate had said, “why don’t we go to Casa Tua? My treat.”

Kate opted for the spinach green tagliatelle with porcini mushrooms and truffle oil sauce; Jack, the tortelloni stuffed with sausage and ricotta. For a short spell it was possible to believe you were in a small café in Puglia rather than one facing out towards a busy road junction on the edge of Camden Town. Experiencing a moment of self-denial, Kate said no to the hazelnut cream gnocchi for dessert and asked for a double espresso instead. Kiley did the same.

All through the meal they had steered clear of what might be termed business. Now Kate asked how the meeting with Daniel Pike had gone, what impression he’d come away with.

“Would I buy a used book from him, do you mean?”

“Something like that.”

“On balance, probably, yes. Though I might shy away from his kind of prices.”

Primed by a flurry of car horns, Kate’s attention turned towards the window and the street outside in time to see a cyclist in full gear swerve up onto the pavement to avoid colliding with a 4x4 driven by a woman paying more attention to her mobile than the traffic lights ahead.

“This Alexandra Pierce,” Kiley said, “you know her at all?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. I interviewed her a year or so back for the *Guardian Weekend*. There was a small show of her photographs at Atlas and they were reproducing some in the magazine.”

“I didn’t know she was a photographer.”

“She’s been a lot of things, Jack. For someone still just the right side of thirty. Model, actor, minor celebrity. I think for a while she was in a band. These last few years, in the main, she seems to have been concentrating on the photography. If you hadn’t walked out on the Saul Leiter when you did, you might have met her there.”

“My loss.”

“Well, there’s a chance to make up for it this Sunday. An afternoon lecture at the British Library: *Sebastian Barker, William Pierce, and the Visionary Heirs of William Blake*.”

Kiley shuddered. “Over my dead body.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to go to the actual lecture. It’s the reception afterwards we’re interested in.”

“We?”

“Sherry and canapés, Jack. What’s not to like? I’ll come along, introduce you to Alexandra. She’s sure to be there. After that you’re on your own.”

Standing on the corner of Royal College Street and Camden Road, traffic pouring past, they kissed then went their separate ways.

Back home, Kiley opened the bottle of ten-year-old Springbank a client had recently passed over in payment, together with a premium ticket for the Chelsea-Spurs game, twelve rows up, level with the half-way line. The match had been a bruising, bad-tempered encounter, twelve players booked, nine from Spurs, Chelsea coming back from two goals down to draw. As was always the case when Kiley watched soccer nowadays, part of the time was spent wishing he were out there on the pitch, the rest thankful that he was not. The leg that had been broken in two places in only his second game of the season for Charlton Athletic—his last as a professional and just a few days short of his thirty-first birthday—still gave him gyp when the weather turned. The whisky was much easier to take. Settled in his one easy chair, Kiley opened the envelope Daniel Pike had given him, smoothed out the pages and began to read.

*It was one of those streets that seemed to run on forever: no beginning, no end. Windows peering down at me as I walked. Doors locked and barred. The only sound of footsteps were my own. As I went slowly forward, shadows appeared on either side, closing in around me until I could barely see the ground beneath my feet or my breath upon the fetid air. And then I heard it. Cheryl’s voice. Small, lonely, more than a little off key. The last time I’d seen her: the last but one, had been a small club in Soho, the Bouillabaisse, an after-hours hang out for musicians, wide boys,*

*users, and spades. The O of her mouth, the way her hand caressed the microphone then stroked her thigh. The breast that slipped a little too carelessly from her dress.*

*Cheryl.*

*I struggled myself awake, awash with sweat, breaking my recurring dream. It couldn't have been Cheryl's voice I heard, I knew that all too well. I had seen her, stretched on the slab, skin cold as the marble beneath her naked body.*

*Dead dames don't sing.*

Arranged around a six-story glass tower designed by Colin St. John Wilson—an oasis of a kind between two main-line railway stations and flush almost against the heavily polluted Euston Road—the British Library houses some 170 million books, manuscripts, maps, prints and more, ranging from the world's earliest printed book, the *Diamond Sutra*, and two copies of the *Magna Carta*, to the manuscript of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*, a gift from a consortium of American bibliophiles “in recognition of Britain's courage in facing Hitler before America came into the war.”

The nearest Kiley had got previously to the front doors had been the café in the piazza and he was disappointed to discover the lecture and ensuing reception were in the adjacent Conference Centre rather than the Library proper. Kate guided him through the crowded foyer towards the Bronte Room, where sixty or so assorted literary types were taking advantage of the opportunity to air a little superior knowledge. Giving the sherry a miss, Kiley settled for some sparkling mineral water from a previously undetected spring deep beneath the Malvern Hills and a bite-sized sliver of Serrano ham wrapped around a small finger of asparagus.

“There she is, Jack,” Kate said quietly over his shoulder.

Alexandra Pierce was wearing a sheer black shirt that hung loose over a fitted purple skirt, a pair of New Balance trainers, suede superimposed with a bright red N, on her feet. She was just turning away, glass in hand, from the man to whom she'd been talking, evidently bored with his company.

Kate moved in fast. “Alex, hi... I don't know if you remember me?”

Alexandra swiveled round and looked at Kate with narrowed eyes. “Remember you, sure. You spent a few thousand words making me look trivial in print. How could I forget?”

“I liked your pictures, though.”

“Yes.” A grudging smile. “Yes, you did. And who's this?”

“This is my friend, Jack. Jack Kiley, Alexandra Pierce.”

Kiley held out his hand.

“I've heard about you. You're Kate's bit of rough.”

He pulled his hand away, untouched.

“I thought you and Jack should have a little talk,” Kate said. “It seems you've got something in common.”

“Really? I can't begin to imagine what that might be.”

“I'll let Jack explain,” Kate said and walked away.

Something akin to a smile played at the corners of Alexandra's mouth. “So, Jack. Do tell.”

“Your father's manuscript,” Kiley said. “The one you're negotiating to sell. For now, let's say, in part at least, you're negotiating through me.”



She took his business card and, with barely a second glance, slipped it from sight.

At Alexandra's suggestion, they went one block east to the brasserie in the St. Pancras Grand. The price of her champagne cocktail and Kiley's bottle of craft beer would have kept a family of four in basic groceries for a week; he was careful to pocket the receipt against expenses.

"Tell me, Jack, just how long have you been in the rare book business?"

"Twenty-four hours, give or take."

There was a smudge of lipstick, faint, against the edge of her glass.

"And the other business?"

"Which business is that?"

"The detective business."

"A lot more than twenty-four hours."

"And do you always get your man?"

"I think that's the Mounties."

"How about the women, Jack, do you always get those?" Her little finger grazed the back of his hand.

Like Marlowe when he first encountered Carmen in *The Big Sleep*, Kiley had to fight the inclination to tell her to grow up and behave.

"Let's talk about your father's manuscript, shall we?"

"Very well." There was a flinty edge to her voice as she leaned away. "What exactly do you want to know?"

"Exactly? That's easy. Is it for real? And is it yours to sell?"

"Yes, it's real. And as soon as Daniel gives me an assurance we have a deal, he can see the rest for himself. As for being mine to sell, my father's wishes were clear. Any future royalties from his published works were to be shared equally between my sister, Frederica, and myself."

"And Frederica's quite happy for this sale to go ahead?"

"I've no idea."

"Surely if she's entitled to a half share...?"

"She's entitled to nothing."

"But your father's wishes..."

"Were related to his published works and published works alone."

"And this..."

"Has never been published and most likely never will be."

"But if it were..."

"Were, I like that, Jack. Correct use of the subjunctive. My father would have approved. A stickler for that kind of thing. Slept with a copy of *Fowler's Modern English Usage* beside the bed. But you, Jack..." The corners of her mouth hinted at a smile. "Scholarship boy, were you? Something of the sort? Passed the eleven plus? Grammar school?"

"But if it were published?" Kiley persisted.

"If it were, we might have to look at the situation again. For the present, however, the manuscript is mine and mine alone. To do with as I see fit. And Daniel Pike's to sell as long as he shows some urgency in the matter. Otherwise I will see it's put out to auction and he can take his chances. All right, Jack? All clear now?"

Tossing back her head, she finished her cocktail in a single swallow.

"There's still the question of the manuscript itself," Kiley said. "Pike's not going to make a move until he's certain the rest of it actually exists."

Alexandra smiled. "As soon as he tells me he's prepared to go ahead, in terms mutually agreed, I'll have the remaining pages couriered round for him to examine. Until then it remains in my possession, safely under lock and key."

She did that little thing again with her finger on the back of his hand.

"You'd be welcome to come and take a peek, Jack. Just to assure him it's all really there. Though I'll need to do a little background checking of my own beforehand. Business cards like the one you gave me, they don't prove a thing."

Kiley wrote a name and number on a coaster and passed it across.

"Detective Chief Inspector at New Scotland Yard. He'll vouch for me. Just give him a call."

"I'll be sure to do that," Alexandra said, rising smoothly to her feet. "Assuming it all checks out, I'll be in touch."

The suggestion of a smile and she was gone, half the men in the bar turning their heads to watch her go, the other half pretending not to. Kiley stayed where he was long enough to finish his India Pale Ale then hopped on the tube a few stops north to Tufnell Park.

According to the Wikipedia page devoted to Alexandra's older sister, Frederica, for a while she'd followed in her father's poetic footsteps: a chapbook, *Silvering the Light*, published by Slow Dancer Press when she was barely out of her teens; *Instruments of the Dance*, published two years later by Enitharmon, was nominated for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection. Since then, silence. Kiley wondered if her muse had withered and died or was somewhere in hiding.

Monday morning, Frederica was in plain sight in her office on the upper floor of the Poetry Society building in central London where she was Assistant to the Director. As offices went, Kiley thought, it was better than most. Slim volumes neatly arranged on the shelves, back issues of *The Poetry Review*, posters on the walls. A view out across the lesser streets of Covent Garden.

Frederica was taller than her sister by several inches and almost fifteen years older, sensibly dressed in a faded green button-through cardigan and beige knee-length skirt. Brown hair gathered up with black ribbon. The merest hint of make-up around the eyes.

Her handshake was quick and firm. "I have a meeting in twelve minutes, Mister Kiley."

He appreciated that degree of accuracy. "Not to waste any time, then, your sister's claim..."

"To have discovered an old manuscript of my father's..."

"Precisely."

"You've met my sister?"

"Briefly, yesterday."

"Long enough to be in her thrall, I dare say, but not enough to learn that she's a fantasist pure and simple. If those aren't contradictions in terms. But a fantasist, Mister Kiley. Or to put it more simply, a liar. And as such so convincing that much of the time I don't suppose she knows herself what is true and what is false."

"And the manuscript..."

“Is false. A figment of my sister’s over-active imagination.”

“But fifty pages...”

“Almost certainly forged.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Mister Kiley, I was—I am—my father’s literary executor. When he knew he was dying, we sat together and went through every poem, every essay, every word he’d ever written for publication. Do you think if such a manuscript as Alexandra has described actually existed it would not, at the very least, have been mentioned?”

“Unless it was something of which he was ashamed.”

“In which case, it would have been destroyed, rather than being left for my sister to so conveniently discover when she was in need of another splurge in the limelight. To say nothing of spiking my guns exactly at the crucial moment.”

“Crucial, how?”

“A novel I’ve been working on for the past three years is about to be published by Faber and Faber.”

“Not a crime novel, I dare say.”

“Not, indeed. A literary novel and un-ashamedly so. Advance suggestions are that reviews will be more than positive, *London Review of Books*, the *TLS*. A profile in *The Times*.”

“You don’t think your sister will be happy, then, to share in your good fortune?”

“I think, if you’ll forgive me for saying so, the bitch would do whatever she could to prevent it. Consign me to the small print, at best.” Swiveling neatly, she scooped up a note book and a batch of files from her desk. “If you follow me down, I can point you towards the exit.”

“It might be useful,” Kiley said on the stairs, “if I could talk to you again.”

“I don’t think so, Mister Kiley. If you’re going to find out my sister’s an inveterate liar, you can do so all on your own.”

Stopping only to stock up on a fresh supply of beans from the Monmouth Coffee Company shop around the corner in Covent Garden—medium roast from Guatemala, his current favorite—and then to touch base with Pike in Camden Passage, Kiley hightailed it back north and home. The moment he set foot inside the charity shop the manager beckoned him over to his cubby hole at the rear.

“What do you want first, Jack? Good news or bad?”

“How about the good?”

“There is no good.”

“Then the bad is...”

“Terminal.”

“The charity’s had notice to quit,” Kiley guessed.

“Twenty-eight days.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It gets worse. Who d’you think’s taking the lease?”

“A dog’s boutique? Carriers, accessories and doggie couture?”

“Worse still.”

“Not another estate agent?”

“How did you guess?”

“I’ll start packing my things.”

“You never know, you might be okay.”

Kiley shook his head. "I'm fussy about who I share space with. And besides, can you imagine the hike in rent?"

"Come with me, Jack. Back up to Yorkshire. The Calder Valley. I never should've left."

"Not for me, I'm afraid. All that fresh air makes me giddy."

"Suit yourself. Oh, and there's a friend of yours upstairs. I let her in. Didn't think you'd mind."

"I didn't even know you had a key."

"Just for emergencies. Fire and that. Fire and flood."

Kate was seated in the easy chair, which she had moved closer to the window, a fat paperback open in her lap. "Picked this up downstairs. *David Copperfield*. Read it?"

"Afraid not. Just look, takes two hands to hold it. No book should be that long. There's no need."

"*War and Peace*?"

"My point exactly."

Kate's face showed her disapproval, then changed as she sniffed the air. "Are those fresh coffee beans in your pocket, Jack, or are you just excited to see me?"

"Just give me a few minutes."

He headed off to the kitchen and Kate went back to her book.

The coffee, when it arrived, lived up to expectations.

"A little bird tells me you're most likely going to be on the move again soon."

"Fresh fields, pastures new."

"Where I am now, there's plenty room enough for two."

"We tried that once, remember? As I recall, we both pretty much agreed it was a disaster."

"There were reasons, Jack. That place was little bigger than a shoe cupboard. We were falling over one another all the time."

"That was the good part."

Kate smiled, remembering. "Where I am now's different. Two floors up into the roof. You could have a room of your own."

Kiley shook his head. "This last couple of months, we've been getting along okay, don't you think?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then let's keep it that way. For now at least."

"Whatever you say." Twisting her head around, she raised up her face to be kissed. Kissed back. One thing led to another. Music drifted up from below. Afternoon morphed into evening.

"I've been thinking," Kate said. She was standing at the window, looking down at the traffic below, the people dining at the Ethiopian restaurant across the street. "Pierce's publisher, you don't suppose he would have mentioned this novel to her, him, whichever it is?"

Kiley allowed himself a quiet grin.

"What?" Kate asked.

"For once I got there before you. Looked in on your pal, Pike, on the way here. He thought it was a good idea too. And Pierce's former publisher, it's a man. Henry. Henry Swift. I'm going down to see him tomorrow."

“Down?”

“Deal. On the Kentish coast.”

Kate’s eyes brightened. “I’ll come with you. I’ve a friend in Deal.”

“You’ve friends everywhere.”

“The forecast is good. You should remember to take your trunks.” Kiley thought that was unlikely: the last time he’d gone swimming in the sea had been on a primary school trip to Southend when he was nine. It was too late to start again now.

For once the forecast hadn’t lied. The sun at mid-morning was bright enough for Kiley to wish he’d brought sunglasses, instead of which he was forced to narrow his eyes against the light. Kate’s friend turned out to be an artist named Arthur Neal, whose strong and colorful paintings Kiley had surprised himself by liking a great deal.

Leaving them to their conversation he made his way along a gently winding stretch of Georgian terraced houses and from there down onto the front. The retirement home was a few hundred meters north along the promenade, a generous-looking red brick building set back behind well-trimmed lawns. After signing in the visitors book at the reception desk, a pleasant-faced woman in an ill-fitting uniform—part-nurse, part-warden—led him to where the former publisher was sitting at the side of the building, rug loose across his knees, eyes closed, catching the sun.

“Mister Swift... Henry... You’ve got a visitor.”

The old man—not so very old really, according to Google in his early eighties—opened an eye and let it fall closed. Kiley brought a folding chair over from where it was leaning against the wall and joined him.

“I thought she’d woken me up,” Swift said, “to give me another lecture on the risks of skin cancer. Actinic keratosis. Basal cell carcinoma. Never seems to occur to them any little thing that hastens the inevitable might be welcome. Save all the trouble and expense of organizing a one-way ticket to Switzerland. Assisted suicide capital of the world. What can I do for you, Mister...?”

“Kiley. Jack Kiley.”

“Jack, then. I’m Henry.”

“William Pierce, Henry, you were his publisher?”

Swift’s head swiveled slowly. “Please don’t tell me you’re another mature student, cobbling together a Ph.D. from our poetic yesterdays? The Open University has a great deal to answer for.”

“If it makes you feel happier, my last brush with formal education was a little over thirty years ago. More passed than failed but it was a close thing.”

“And now?”

“Now I’m a private detective.”

Swift gave him a quick, approving smile. “Here to learn where the bodies are buried, no doubt.”

“Are there bodies?”

“In publishing? Quite a few. Stabbed in the back, mostly. Skeletons, by now. Metaphorical for the most part, but not all.”

“Many in Pierce’s cupboard?”

“Skeletons? No more than to be expected. Savage bastards, poets.”

“Pierce included?”

Swift shrugged. “No better, no worse than most.”

“You stuck with him, though. As a publisher, I mean.”

“And as a friend.”

“If there were any old unpublished manuscripts rattling round, you’d have known?”

Laughter rattled around Swift’s chest and emerged as a rasping cough.

“That old chestnut, is it? Thought that had been done and buried years ago. William’s brush with the pot-boiler trade.”

“There was a book, then? A manuscript, at least.”

Swift pulled the rug higher with an arthritic hand. “Talk of a book, there was plenty of that. Late at night, the bottle down to its final dregs. How William was going to take on the Yanks and beat them at their own game. Jonathan Latimer. Mickey Spillane. He even had a title. Something about dames.”

“*Dead Dames Don’t Sing.*”

“That’s it. With a title like that, he used to say, stick the right picture on the cover and it’ll sell a million. Just one problem, I used to tell him, you can’t just have a cover, you’ve got to have a story to go with it. And he’d tell me this yarn about a jazz singer and a black G.I. who’d hung around in Soho after the war. At which point I’d say that’s all very fine, but it’s not enough to have that all in your head, you’ve got to get it down on paper. And he’d wave his hands around and say tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow and pour himself another drink.” Swift paused for breath. “We all know what happens to tomorrow.”

“So it never got written, that’s what you’re saying?”

“Oh, some maybe. A little. A chapter or two. Nothing more Nothing that I ever saw.”

“And he couldn’t have finished the book and taken it to someone else instead? Another publisher?”

“Someone less literary, you mean? It’s not impossible. There were enough to be found, bottom feeders happy to swim in the muck. Writers, too. Hacks who’d turn around a manuscript in four or five weeks, three at a push. Science fiction, westerns, fantasy, crime. 128-page paperbacks, 50,000 words. The sort of work that called for one thing William never had and that was discipline, the kind that keeps you at your desk for up to eight hours a day. Sonnets, they were more his cup of tea. Fourteen lines you could worry away at between lunch and heading off back down to the pub.”

A sudden flurry of coughing bent the older man almost double and sent Kiley inside in search of water. Swift drank in small sips and dabbed a tissue at his eyes.

“Go days practically without speaking and then when I do, this happens.” Reaching out a crippled hand, he patted Kiley gently on the knee. “Piece of advice. Don’t get old. And don’t take my word for any of this. There must be one of two of the old crowd still alive. Fitzrovia. Soho. The Wheatsheaf, that’s where a lot of them used to congregate, Rathbone Place. Later it was the Highlander in Dean Street—changed its name since—a lot of film people used to drink in there. Where William met her, of course, that actress he had a bit of a fling with. The one who

was going to be in the movie he was sure was going to be made from his novel. After it had topped the best seller lists, of course.”

Swift shook his head.

“Bit of a fantasist, William. All right for a poet, desirable in fact; not so good when it comes to real life.”

A fantasist, Kiley thought, as he stood his chair back up against the wall: where he had heard that before?

When they met at the station, Kate had a carefully bubble-wrapped and brown-papered package, the size and thickness of a large, fat book under one arm. He didn't ask. She'd also brought home-made scones from the Neals' kitchen and a Thermos of coffee; the flask to be returned at a later date.

“Good day?” Kiley asked.

“Lovely. You?”

“Interesting.”

At Ramsgate they changed trains, the last vestige of sun faltering gradually towards evening. The coffee was black and strong, the scones rich with butter and black currant jam. Kiley thought about Henry Swift, living out his last years alone but looked after, in sight and sound of the sea. On a good day, if he screwed his eyes up tight, he would just be able to spy the coast of France. Better that, Kiley thought, than taking a flight to Switzerland and never coming back.

Alongside him, Kate was just starting chapter 32 of *David Copperfield: The Beginning of a Long Journey*.

Leaning across, Kiley squeezed her hand, kissed her hair.

“What's brought that on?” she asked.

Kiley grinned. “I don't suppose there's any more coffee in that flask?”

It wasn't until they were passing through Canterbury and Kate looked up from her book long enough to admire the spire of the cathedral, that Kiley told her about his conversation with Pierce's former publisher.

“A thing with an actress,” Kate said, her interest piqued. “I wonder who that might have been?”

“Someone who frequented the Highlander, whoever she was.”

“The Nellie Dean, as it is now.”

“I was thinking, that writer friend of yours... didn't she do a book set in Soho?”

“You mean Cathi?”

“Unsworth, yes. *Bad Penny Blues*, that what it was called? “

Kate nodded.

“Isn't she involved in some organization that's got something to do with Soho back in the fifties? I remember you going to a talk there once.”

“The Sohemians, yes.”

“Maybe you could ask her? If she doesn't know herself, she might be able to point you at someone who does.”

“And I should do this why?”

“Because you like being Nora to my Nick?”

Kate's face broke into a smile. “You did read that book I gave you.”

“*Thin Man*, thin book. Just about my size.”

“You said it. Now let me finish this chapter. Old Mr. Peggotty is about to set off alone in search of his niece.”

“Good luck with that.”

Kiley’s mobile started ringing as they were crossing the station concourse at St. Pancras. Kate brushed his cheek with hers and continued walking. Disembodied, Alexandra’s voice sounded oddly childlike, a child playing dress-up.

“You checked out, Jack. Your pal at Scotland Yard.”

“So I can see your father’s manuscript?”

“Maybe.”

“I thought we had a deal? My credentials are okay I get first sight of the manuscript. Everything seems kosher, I advise Daniel accordingly.”

“Aren’t you forgetting the other little matter, Jack? Part of your job description, I’m sure.”

“And what would that be?”

“Just how far am I to be trusted? In your professional judgment, that is.”

“It’s an interesting question.”

“And have you arrived at any conclusion?”

“Not so far.”

“Then why don’t you come round a little later? Check me for probity and, just maybe, if you’re very good, see the manuscript at the same time.”

She was laughing at him and for now he didn’t care. The address she gave him was in Kensington, a short distance from the Royal Albert Hall. She was still laughing as he closed the phone.

The apartment was on the top floor of a mansion block, with views out across Kensington Gardens. High ceilings, deep rooms. Both sides of a broad hallway were hung with framed photographs Alexandra had taken: portraits of celebrities along one side, mostly from the arts: the actor, Bill Nighy, Kiley recognized; the painter Frank Auerbach—this latter only thanks to a show at Tate Britain Kate had dragged him round not once, but three times. Opposite were city shots, buildings from strange angles, distortions, odd diagonals, unsuspected patches of color.

“You much into photography, Jack?”

“I like a good snap as much as anyone.”

Alexandra tilted back her head and laughed, the movement softening the outline of her face.

“Does anyone really go for that act, Jack?”

“Which act is that?”

“Your straight-talking, call-a-spade-a-spade, don’t-waste-any-of-those highfaluting-ideas-on-me act.”

“Once in a while, yes.”

“Kate Keenan included?”

Kiley shook his head. “Smart woman, Kate. Sees through me like glass.”

“And takes you to her bed just the same. Or so I’ve been led to believe. Clearly more to you, Jack, than meets the eye.” The smile was coy and knowing at the same time. “When you’ve finished admiring my portfolio, come on through.”

Furniture and fittings were arranged as artfully as one of her photographs—facing settees, low table, chairs—move anything even a little to one side and the whole thing risked falling into disarray. And like her photographs the colors were



mostly muted, monochrome, offset by scarlet cushions, a side wall of brightest blue.

Alexandra stood close against the window, partly silhouetted against a purple sky. She was wearing a white top that was part vest, part something else; skinny blue jeans, bare feet. There was a tattoo, indistinct, on the inside of her right arm.

“A drink, Jack?”

“Why not?”

She left the room, leaving Kiley to admire the view, and returned with two heavy-bottomed glasses and a bottle of Bushmills’.

“You could try the settee, Jack, it’s not as uncomfortable as it looks.”

Partly through genuine interest, Kiley asked about the photography, how and why she’d started, if she’d studied and where; whether it had been difficult at first to get her work accepted by the bigger magazines. Any counter questions about himself, his own work, he deflected, turning the conversation back around.

Alexandra reached across and refilled his glass. The Bushmills’ had a slightly honeyed taste that made it seem as you were scarcely drinking alcohol at all.

“I went to see your sister,” Kiley said.

“Made you feel welcome, I’m sure.”

“She was a little formal, thinking back.”

“Stand too close there’s a good chance of getting frostbite. It’s a recognized fact. Fingers first, then toes.”

“She thinks you’re out to sabotage the launch of her novel.”

“As if. Besides, she’s more than capable of doing that herself. Can you imagine Frederica schmoozing the press? A PR disaster of significant proportions.”

“Maybe the book will speak for itself?”

“These days, it takes a lot more than that. If she were to maneuver herself into a threesome with a couple of Premiership footballers, or come swinging out of the cross-gender closet, that might manage to shift a few copies, but otherwise... If she’s lucky it’s a couple of half-way decent reviews, a profile in the *Telegraph* no one’s going to read, and, just maybe, a shot at the Booker long list.”

“No love lost between you, would that be the right expression?”

“I could think of others.”

“As I understand it, your father appointed Frederica his executor some little time before he died. She says if any unpublished manuscript existed she would have known about it for certain.”

“Well, she would, wouldn’t she? And besides, it’s hardly the kind of thing he would have talked to Frederica about. He’d have been able to judge her reaction only too well, known she’d disapprove.”

“Did he ever discuss it with you?”

“Not really, no. Not in any detail. Just, you know, when he’d been drinking some time. It never occurred to me that he’d actually put in the time, committed his ideas to paper. Until I saw it with my own eyes.”

“And that was when?”

“Earlier this year. In Cornwall. Just outside St. Just. Miller’s Cottage. It belonged to my mother, her side of the family. We used to go there on holiday when we were children. Sometimes my father would go down on his own, squirrel

himself away whenever things got too hectic at home and he needed time and space for his poetry. It must have been where he wrote the novel as well.”

“And what? It was hidden away in a drawer somewhere?”

“The loft space. We scarcely used the cottage anymore and it was falling into disrepair, so we were going to put it with an agency, rent it out. Holidays. There were things that needed doing before that could happen and Frederica reckoned she was too busy. So I went down to make an inventory, see what was worth keeping, what wanted throwing away. There’d been some kind of leak and the man I called in to fix it went looking for a header tank in the roof. He found this bundle wrapped in sacking, tied up with string. There was a stationery box inside. A manila folder inside that. When I turned it over, there was the title, *Dead Dames Don’t Sing*. My father’s name underneath. The pages inside were a little damp but nothing more. At first, I could scarcely believe it. But there it was, all sixteen chapters. Right up to THE END.”

“You read it?”

“Not then. Not right away. But later.”

“And?”

Alexandra laughed. “Everything the title led you to expect. Desperate women and dangerous men.”

She swiveled sideways, her bare foot sliding across the top of Kiley’s shoe.

“You’ve been very patient, Jack. You want to take a peek?”

The safe was in the bedroom. Where else? The room itself oddly austere. A white duvet, barely creased. Little by way of decoration save for the portrait of Alexandra, nude, that hung above the bed.

She moved the canvas just far enough aside to expose the safe.

The manuscript was in a folder, as Alexandra had said, a label stuck to the front bearing the title and the author’s name.

“You can take it out, Jack. It won’t bite.”

“Shouldn’t I be wearing special gloves or something?”

“Just make sure you handle with care.”

The pages were smooth like any other; what did he expect? Most of the paper was off-white, save for a section towards the end, around thirty pages, which was pale blue. The type was faint in places, as if Pierce had waited too long before changing the ribbon. Notes were scattered here and there in the margins, similar to the ones in the section Kiley had already seen; the occasional word crossed out and an alternative written in, circled where necessary and arrowed into place. All in the same recognizable hand.

“Satisfied?” Alexandra asked.

“Yes. As far as it goes.”

“You wanted to make sure the rest of the manuscript was all there. There it is.”

There was a new tightness in her voice, as if everything up to now had been just pleasant fooling around; now it was as if she were handing him his coat and ushering him out the door.

“Go and see Daniel. Tell him he’s got another forty-eight hours. After that he can take his chances along with the rest.”

Kiley knew better than most when a welcome was overstayed. The night air was cold but he decided to walk back across the Park nonetheless. When he reached

Marble Arch he'd pick up a cab; until then he wanted to think, clear his head. Beyond the darkness of the trees, swans glided along the Long Water of the Serpentine like ghosts.

When he went to make his report the following morning something was nagging at a corner of his mind that he couldn't shake free. The sky was overcast, busy with the prospect of rain. Daniel Pike seemed happy nonetheless, cheered by Kiley's news. All there, every page. He insisted Kiley stay for coffee and almond croissants that came, hand delivered, from a high-end bakery around the corner on Upper Street. He was more or less determined, Kiley could see, to go ahead, the chance of catching his fellow-dealers flat-footed too great an opportunity to resist.

"I'll call Alexandra later, agree terms. She can have the manuscript couriered to me here within the hour. I'll have my tame experts give it the once over. And then it's full speed ahead."

Seeing Kiley's face, he hesitated.

"What? You think there's something not right?"

"I don't know."

"From what you've told me, the only possible fly in the ointment now is Frederica. There's an outside chance, if and when she learns the sale is going ahead, she might try to take out some kind of injunction against her sister. But frankly, I think that's unlikely. With her own novel coming out any day now, all her energies are going to be focused there."

"This actress Henry Swift mentioned," Kiley said, "you think that's worth following up at all?"

Pike smiled. "I don't really think so, do you?"

Kiley shrugged. "Your call." He chased down the last piece of croissant with a swig of coffee and reached across to shake Pike's hand. "I'll let you have an invoice, expenses as agreed, some time in the next few days."

Back outside, the threat of rain seemed to have abated. The new movie about Miles Davis was playing at the Screen on the Green. Kiley wondered why he'd never really liked Davis's music as much as he probably should have. Perhaps there was simply too much? Like Dickens. All those albums; all those fat, baggy books. A man can only do what time allows.

There were two emails waiting for him when he logged back on. One was from Margaret Hamblin at her offices at Hamblin, Laker and Clarke, Solicitors, where she was a senior partner—Would Jack get back to her ASAP? He would. The other was from Derek Becker, a saxophone player who'd had the misfortune to get mixed up in one of Kiley's investigations and ended up in hospital for his troubles. *Got a gig at the Vortex, Jack, this coming Sunday. Be good to see you there.* There was nothing from Kate.

When he phoned Margaret Hamblin, her assistant said she was in a meeting and might be tied up for the remainder of the day. Just minutes later, the assistant called back. Could he meet Margaret at Grain Store by the Regent's Canal at six o'clock? He certainly could, especially if it was on her expense account and not his.

The remainder of the day was his to waste.

Waste it, he did.

Margaret was at the restaurant when he arrived, tucking into some sprouting seeds and beans with a potato wafer and a dab of miso aubergine. Hint of treats to come. There was a bottle of Sancerre open and underway. A quick glance at the menu reassured Kiley the rump of lamb was still holding its own amongst the quinoa falafels and the seaweed and vegetable dashi.

Immaculately tailored as usual, Margaret's face was showing signs of strain: too full a work-load, too little sleep. Even with a willing partner, adopting a two-year-old well into your mid-forties was perhaps not a top idea. One of the potential witnesses in a court case involving a client had disappeared. Could be hiding out in Cyprus, family in Nicosia, more likely the Mile End Road.

"It's urgent, Jack."

"Have I ever let you down?"

"Shall I count the ways?"

He thought she was quoting from something but didn't know what.

Back in his flat a couple of hours later, he poured himself a small glass of the remaining Springbank and slid *Kind of Blue* into the stereo. Maybe it wasn't too late to give Miles a serious try. Still no message from Kate. Never mind. He had yet to finish the first fifty pages of *Dead Dames Don't Sing*.

*The smoke inside the club was so thick it seemed to hang in coils from the ceiling, the smell of marijuana sweet and lingering on the air. I made my way between tables busy with mainly black bodies—West Indians and former American G.I.s—faces turned expectantly towards the small semi-circle of stage where a microphone stood lonely in the spotlight, a baby grand at an angle behind, lid optimistically raised.*

*By the time I'd found myself a seat in a corner by the side wall and ordered a gimlet, a piano player with hunched shoulders and fingers like spindles was stroking the keys. After several aimless moments, the doodling became a tune, a song the audience recognized as her song, and a desperate hush fell over the room. Then there she was. Her body cocooned in a sheath of shimmering gold that emphasized the startling whiteness of her skin, the globes of her partly exposed breasts reflecting back the light. Fingers of one hand smoothing her dress down along her thigh, with the other she reached for the microphone as tenderly, as urgently as she might reach for a lover, eased it closer to her mouth and began to sing...*

As Margaret Hamblin had suspected, her reluctant witness had not strayed far from the Mile End Road, Kiley unearthing him in the back room of a greasy spoon that was trying urgently to reinvent itself as cool. Derek Becker's Vortex gig went down a storm. Kate's text, when it finally arrived, was brief and to the point: *Cathi putting me in touch with a film buff from the Sohemians, expect more soon.* Then this in the morning post...

A very special announcement to our clients from  
Pike Fine & Rare Books  
**"Dead Dames Don't Sing"**  
by William Pierce

**The remarkable and unrecorded manuscript of an unpublished crime novel by the distinguished British poet throws a completely new light on his development as a young writer. The novel is vividly set in London's bohemian Soho in the mid-1950s and revolves around the murder of a female jazz singer who had been simultaneously involved with a saxophone player and former American G.I.**

All the available evidence suggests the novel was composed in the late 1950s, when Pierce was in his mid-twenties and still to find serious recognition as a poet. The novel's survival is in the form of an unbound working manuscript, comprising 234 pp on white and/or light blue typing paper of A4 (i.e. 25x20cm.) Many of the pages bear Pierce's working revisions in blue ink in his identifiable hand. The typescript is housed in its original square-cut manila folder with Pierce's holograph title of the novel formally stated in capitals on a cream label pasted to the flap. Several pages are somewhat creased and stained, and there is occasional smudging of the blue ink, but the entire text is absolutely legible.

This is a truly unique item for which we have fully confirmed provenance, having come to us directly through negotiation with a family member, and as such we are very proud to make it available for purchase to one of our valued customers. Its rarity and biographical significance would suit a high-quality and select collection of twentieth century literary papers, and our private buyers may well recognize this as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, as, in all probability, will various distinguished institutions, in the U.K. or overseas.

Interested clients are most warmly invited to contact Daniel Pike at Pike Fine & Rare Books to discuss the terms of this purchase at their earliest opportunity.

So there it is, Kiley thought, done and dusted, his first venture into the world of rare books coasting to an end. Client well satisfied. Time to step away.

Kate's voice when she rang was a little ragged, as if perhaps she'd had a later night than usual, too little sleep. He didn't ask. "The Sohemians," she said, "They had a meeting yesterday. This actress you're interested in, I've got a name. Yvonne Fisher."

It rang no bells.

"Any way of contacting her?" Kiley asked.

"Ouija board? Crystal ball?"

"Dead, then?"

"Not so long ago. 2010 at the age of 79. But she had a daughter, Susan, still very much alive. It was her I spoke to. Explained your interest."

"You think she'd talk to me?"

"I don't see why not."

Susan Fisher was sixty and in a more forgiving light could have passed for ten years younger. Her hair, platinum blonde with a hint of silver, looked to have been recently styled and cut; her clothes, Kiley guessed, were well-chosen or expensive or both. The apartment where she lived, on the upper floor of a late-Victorian

double-fronted house on the fringes of Hampstead, was comfortably furnished, rugs in muted colors on the floor, a cat—Siamese, Kiley thought—fixing him with a look of disdain from where it lay, curled, at a corner of a well-upholstered settee.

Three albums of her mother's photographs and ephemera lay ready on the dining room table.

"Tea, Mr. Kiley? Coffee? Something stronger?"

"Tea would be fine, thank you. And it's Jack, please. Jack."

"Then you must call me Susan." She smiled. It was a nice smile. Not overwrought with meaning and secure. "When my husband died, I went back to using my own name. Fisher. It seemed ungrateful somehow, seeing he'd left me more than comfortably off. But finding myself alone after the best part of thirty years I needed to find who I was again. No longer somebody's wife."

"I understand."

"Do you? Well, it's good of you to say so. Now please, do start going through those things of mother's while I attend to the tea."

The first album was mostly family photographs. Susan, at no more than eight or nine, already recognizable as the woman she had since become; her mother, strikingly beautiful when she was younger and possessed of a vitality that shone through even the most formal of moments; a somber-faced man Kiley presumed to be Susan's father.

The remaining albums contained a mixture of press cuttings, photos and playbills. Theater programs from places Kiley had heard of but never visited. Showcards from films he had never seen. Studio-shot glamor portraits in which Yvonne Fisher, wearing a skimpy swimming costume, reached up for a beach ball high above her head, or, bending low in a scoop-topped blouse, patted an obliging puppy with her hand.

"She hated all that," Susan Fisher said, setting cups and saucers down on a tray. "All that charm school nonsense. Pin-ups for *Picturegoer* and *Picture Show*. Signed postcards for the fans. What she wanted to do was act, not pose. But in those days, if you were an actress—a starlet, as they used to call them—it was the only way. Maybe it still is, I don't know."

"How successful was she?" Kiley asked. "Looking at all of this, it seems as if she worked a good deal, but I'm afraid her name didn't ring any bells."

"It was a long time ago, Mr. Kiley..."

"Jack."

"I'm sorry, yes, Jack. All a long time ago and there are precious few names from those days, British names that is, that remain in the public consciousness. Diana Dors, I suppose. Virginia McKenna, maybe. Susan Shaw. Poor Susan—I was named after her, you know. She and my mother acted together in the first film mother made."

Reaching past Kiley, she turned the page.

"There. *Wide Boy*. A cheap crime film, just a little over an hour long, and, as I remember it, not very good at all. Of course, Susan was the star and most of my mother's performance ended up on the cutting room floor."

"You said poor Susan when you mentioned her before..."

"Yes. Her husband, her second husband, crashed the sports car he was driving and was killed. Susan never got over it. She started drinking, drinking heavily,

and never recovered. She was penniless when she died. The studio paid for her funeral.”

“Your mother didn’t follow in those footsteps, at least.”

“No. Though to hear her reminisce about those days, it wasn’t as if she didn’t try.”

Turning another page, she pointed at a photograph showing a youngish woman, smartly dressed but clearly more than a little tipsy, standing between two men and smiling at the camera for all she was worth.

“That was taken outside the Wheatsheaf on Rathbone Place. Practically a home from home in those days. And there, on the left, that’s the man you’re interested in. William Pierce.”

Kiley peered closely. Pierce was just above medium height, dark suit, cigarette, homburg hat, cockeyed smile.

“This is when they were having an affair?”

“Is that what it was? I don’t know. They were close, certainly.”

“And this?” Kiley pointed at the other man. Taller, leaner of face, hat at a rakish angle, a sardonic look in his eyes.

“Anthony LeStrange. He was a writer. A screenwriter. It was Anthony who was meant to be turning William’s book into the film that would be my mother’s vehicle to stardom. A night club singer in love with two men, one white and one black. Quite daring for its day.” She shook her head. “My mother used to laugh about it later in life: the film that was never made from the book that was never written.”

“Never? You’re sure?”

“A few lines scribbled on the back of an envelope, perhaps, but other than that, I doubt it very much. And I’m sure my mother would have said if it were.” She smiled a trifle sadly, recalling her mother’s pleasure. “I think they were all too busy having a good time.”

“Come round for dinner,” Kate had said. “Latish. Eight-thirty. Nine.” They sat in the window of Kate’s apartment, the table fitting neatly into the bay. It was only the second time Kiley had been there since she’d moved in. There were still books in boxes, newspapers and magazines in overlapping piles on the floor.

“I spoke with Daniel today,” Kate said. “He seems really pleased. Apparently he’s had one or two serious offers already. Big money, too. Just as well. I see news has sneaked out on to the web. Famous poet’s sexy Soho past. Be in the papers tomorrow. The broadsheets, at least.” She stopped, seeing the shift in Kiley’s expression, the frown. “What? What’s the matter?”

“I just hope he’s not about to fall flat on his face.”

“I thought you assured him everything was okay?”

“As far as I could tell. I offered to poke around further, but he wasn’t interested. Too anxious to go ahead.”

“And you think that was a mistake?”

“I hope not. I don’t know.”

“Was this something Susan Fisher said? Something to do with her mother?”

“Not really, no. Just some stupid itch that won’t go away.”

“Calamine lotion, Jack. That or a good night’s sleep.”

Dinner over—fillets of brill, new potatoes, broccoli, green beans—Kiley said no to a second glass of wine, stood stranded between table and door.

“Go home,” Kate said, not unkindly. “Get some rest.”

He woke at three, a little after, seven minutes past, the time top right on the screen when he switched on the computer. Typed the name into the search bar: Anthony LeStrange. William Pierce’s drinking companion, screenwriter and friend. Who was to say he hadn’t turned his hand to fiction as well? There were eleven entries under his name, four of them immediately relevant: Wikipedia, IMDB, filmmakers.com, screenplaylists.com. Seven screenplays filmed between 1949 and 1962 and LeStrange was listed as co-writer on three more and an associate producer credit on two others. But nothing to suggest he’d ever turned his hand to other forms of writing, not even the shortest of short stories, an article on screenwriting for *Sight and Sound*.

Before going back to bed, Kiley went across to the window and looked down at the street outside. A young fox, lean and with a healthy brush of tail, stood stock still at the curb edge, nose in the air, before trotting neatly across the road and disappearing out of sight.

Almost the next thing he knew was the phone going, jerking him awake. Susan Fisher’s cultivated voice. “Jack, I hope I’m not calling too early?”

“No. No, not at all.”

“It’s just that I’ve remembered. Anthony had a brother. Christopher. I think he was some kind of a writer, too.”

Kiley thanked her, bundled out of bed, splashed water on his face and set coffee on the stove. Christopher, then. Christopher LeStrange. LinkedIn offered him the opportunity to view the profiles of 25 top professionals with that name. PeekYou, better still, boasted 43 with the same name or near enough. Then there were Facebook, MySpace and Spokeo. Two cups of coffee later, Kiley was bowed down by information overload, disappointed and confused. If Susan Fisher had been correct in remembering Anthony’s brother as a writer, he seemed to be a writer who—unless he were the Christopher LeStrange whose research area had been disorders of the lower bowel, or the LeStrange with a seemingly inexhaustible interest in the Southern India Railway companies of the 1860s—didn’t seem to have published a thing.

His back was aching from sitting in the same position too long and his eyes blurry from staring at the screen. By some small miracle, Margaret Hamblin’s assistant was able to put him through right away.

“A favor, Margaret...”

“Name it.”

“That whiz kid of yours who can track down absolutely anything on the internet from a window seat in Starbucks...”

In only a little more time than it would take to down and digest a large Caramel Cocoa Cluster Frappuccino with layers of graham cracker crumble, the results were spooling on to Kiley’s computer. Hiding behind a plethora of names, none even close to his own, it seemed that between 1957 and 1989 Christopher LeStrange had published no less than sixteen westerns, three science fiction tales, four travel books, two crime novels and fifteen stories, each sixty-four pages long,



in the *Sexton Blake Library*. Born in 1935, three years after his brother, Christopher had died in 2015 at the age of eighty.

Kiley took a walk around the block to digest the news. The fact that Pierce had been close—one relative away—to a productive writer of pulp fiction meant little or nothing on its own. In the corner shop, he bought one newspaper and glanced through several others. Only two seemed to have picked up on the story of the distinguished poet's disreputable literary past, though both emphasized the potentially large sums the newly discovered manuscript might fetch on the specialist collectors' market.

Back indoors, Kiley tried calling Daniel Pike's number but the line seemed to be permanently engaged. Confronting Alexandra Pierce without anything more to brace her would earn him little more than a look as disdainful as Susan Fisher's Siamese and a bored So What?

What was needed was another angle of attack.

Another crack in Alexandra's story.

The next two hours were spent on the phone, laptop open, calling every plumber and handy man within a fifteen mile radius of St. Just. Penzance to Land's End. He was on the point of giving up when he finally tracked down the man who had been out, twice, to Miller's Cottage in the preceding three months. Yes, there'd been a leak. Yes, the header tank. The loft. No memory of anything up there being found, taken back down. Nothing wrapped in sacking; no kind of container, large or small. Was he sure? Course he was bloody sure.

So, now, was Kiley.

More or less.

A further call to Daniel Pike proved as fruitless as before.

Time to tackle Alexandra herself.

Early evening: the light just beginning to fade. Shadows deepening across the park. Many of the windows in the mansion block were already illuminated, some with their blinds partly closed. A couple were leaving as Kiley arrived and with a brisk word of thanks he stepped inside and crossed the tiled lobby to the lift.

The door to Alexandra's apartment was ajar.

Voices raised inside.

And then a scream.

Alexandra was crouching at the far side of the room, one arm raised as if to ward off danger, her face pale against the blue of the wall. Kiley took one cautious step towards her, then another, and her eyes flinched, staring past him, past his shoulder, Kiley turning just in time to avoid the blow aimed at the back of his head and swiveling smartly away.

He was tall, around Kiley's height, and heavier, but slow, out of condition. Kiley hit him twice in the body and he stumbled back then charged, head down, arms flailing. At the last moment, Kiley stepped aside and stuck out a leg, the impetus sending his attacker headlong into a low table, then somersaulting to the floor.

When he pushed himself up onto his hands and knees, there was blood seeping from a cut above his right eye and he was breathing heavily.

"Fuck this for a game of soldiers," he said.

Kiley helped him to his feet.

"You know this bastard?" Alexandra said, moving warily away from the wall.

“Not exactly.”

“Steven LeStrange...”

“Jack Kiley.”

They shook hands. Alexandra muttered something coarse beneath her breath and turned away.

Some twenty minutes later, the room set to rights, a plaster rather clumsily in place over LeStrange’s eye, the two men sat facing one another while Alexandra, having changed and repaired her face, uncorked a bottle of wine.

“I’m finding this,” she said, “all a little hard to believe. One minute this oaf is calling me a mercenary bitch and threatening to kill me, the next I’m pouring him a glass of half-way decent Merlot.”

“I didn’t mean it,” LeStrange said. “The killing you part.”

“That wasn’t how it seemed at the time.”

“Well, I’m sorry, okay? But you’ve got to admit...”

“Admit what?”

“You stitched me up. Lied to your hind teeth.”

Alexandra shrugged.

“He does have a point,” Kiley said.

“And which point is that?”

“As I understand it, when Steven was going through his father’s things...”

“A nightmare. Copies of everything he’d ever written, not in any sort of order at all.”

“...he came across the manuscript of *Dead Dames Don’t Sing*.”

“That’s right. Along with several others which, for whatever reason, had never been published. Some with publishers’ rejection letters, some not. But this particular manuscript had a letter that made clear it was written at your father’s request. Paid for and commissioned by him and based upon his own outline, which was attached. My father delivered a first draft which your father read through, adding suggestions for some small changes before sending it back. Before those revisions could be made, for whatever reason, your father must have changed his mind about any possible publication. There was no second draft.”

Alexandra angled her face away.

“I showed you your father’s letter,” LeStrange continued, “when I first got in touch, wondering if the manuscript would have any particular value. And you said you thought probably not, though there was a faint chance it might be of interest to a Ph.D. student somewhere researching your father’s early work. Find the right person, you said, it might fetch as much as six or seven hundred pounds. Leave it with me and I’ll use my contacts, ask around. Better still, why don’t I just take it off your hands? And for the manuscript and the letter, you offered me five hundred pounds.”

“Which you accepted.”

“In good faith. While you thought you’d find a way to make a great deal more.”

Alexandra shrugged. “If you were gullible, that’s not exactly my fault, is it?”

“You lied.”

“That’s not a crime.”

“Maybe not,” Kiley said, “but I suspect the kind of misrepresentation you were guilty of foisting on Daniel Pike might well be.”

“Daniel believed what he wanted to believe.”

“If you’d shown him the letter as well as the manuscript, he wouldn’t have been able to, would he? You’ve still got it, I suppose?”

“What if I’ve burned it?”

“Then,” LeStrange said, “I’ve a photo copy and another scanned into the computer. Perhaps I’m not quite as gullible as you took me for.”

Alexandra went into the bedroom and came back with a plain A3 envelope, the letter inside.

“Take it. And get out of my house, the pair of you. If I never see either of you again, it won’t be too soon.”

Like most stories that begin with once upon a time, this particular story has a happy ending. For some, at least. Daniel Pike withdrew the advertised manuscript of *Dead Dames Don’t Sing* from private sale in sufficient time to keep his customers onside and avoid his integrity being besmirched. Kate contrived, some convenient time later, to place a lengthy article in the *Guardian’s Saturday Review*, in which she referred to the confusion over the novel’s authorship as a footnote to the careers of two talented brothers, both of whose work had blossomed in the heady world of 1950s bohemian Soho, the screenwriter and producer Anthony LeStrange and his brother, Christopher, a hitherto unremarked and under-appreciated writer of popular fiction.

As a consequence of this and several related pieces, a short retrospective of films written by Anthony LeStrange were shown at the British Film Institute’s South Bank cinema and Daniel Pike was able to sell the manuscript of Christopher’s unpublished novel, *Dead Dames Don’t Sing*, for a four figure sum.

Frederica Pierce’s novel, *An Inner Life*, was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize and there were rumors that the movie rights had been bought by Nicole Kidman. Her sister, Alexandra, set her camera aside, temporarily, in favor of a return to modeling and was seen at London Fashion Week in the company of Naomi Campbell and Kate Moss.

As for Kiley, after some scabbling around, he found an affordable studio apartment in the nether regions of Kentish Town, the building sandwiched between a hardware store and a tattoo parlor. Having given Kate a spare set of keys, ever hopeful he might come home one day and find her expectantly awaiting his arrival, he found instead, one grim late afternoon in November, that she had been and gone, leaving behind one of Arthur Neal’s paintings, the one she had bought that day in Deal, a semi-abstract landscape—rich reds, dark blues and lustrous greens, all leaning, one against the other—that gladdened his heart and banished, for a time at least, all thought of the surrounding misery and gloom.

*So Nice to Come Home To.*

He had that Chet Baker CD somewhere still, didn’t he?

