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Kiss Me Quick

Written by Danny Miller

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Kiss Me Quick

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To Josie Miller

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PROLOGUE

JACK, FOREVER

24 December 1939. Brighton. The middle of the night.

The driver glanced in the rear-view mirror as the man in the back seat ignited a cigarette with a gold lighter. As the flame burned, the man rubbed his thumb over the cartouche that had been etched with: 'Jack, Pour Toujours'. It was a gift. She knew that he would appreciate this inscription, because Jack Regent was in the habit of putting his mark on the things he owned: monogrammed shirts from Jermyn Street, engraved silver cigarette cases from Aspreys and gold lighters from Dupont.

Jack snuffed out the flame and drew slowly on the cigarette, pulling the rich pungent smoke deep into his lungs. Then he steadily exhaled, and plumed a chain of smoke towards the mirror that the driver, Henry Pierce, was watching him in. Caught out, Pierce averted his eyes. He knew Jack didn't like being stared at. He knew he wanted to be alone with his thoughts. The cigarette was Jack's first real taste of freedom, and he was enjoying it.

They were sitting in a maroon 1936 Rover 8: red leather upholstery, walnut dashboard, top of the range. Less than an hour ago Jack Regent had stepped out through the gates of Lewes prison to find Pierce already waiting for him. He had been released early, with a commendation from the Governor. Jack had

stopped a prison riot, one he'd organized, incited, then heroically ended. Jack also saved a screw from a beating – a beating he'd ordered, planned, then courageously prevented. It was all just a set-up, resulting in seven years being commuted to eighteen months.

Jack had been sent down for a malicious wounding. A bookmaker had refused to pay up, so a razor was pulled out and drawn across his face. Jack left his mark. The choice of weapon, the open razor, was not typical of Jack, however. He had always thought razors childish, a twee English affectation. You could never put enough force behind a razor to do the real damage. It acted more as a warning. Regent didn't hold with the idea of warning his enemies, therefore the bookie was viewed as a mistake. A mistake he promised himself he would never make again. A promise he was going to keep tonight. Jack took one last hit of his cigarette, then stubbed it out.

That gesture was Henry Pierce's cue. Pierce opened the car door, unfolded himself from the driver's seat and expanded to his full bulk: six foot five inches and 230 pounds. An imposing figure sheathed in black from the brogues on his feet to the Homburg on his head. He reached into the pockets of his long black chesterfield overcoat and took out a pair of kid-leather gloves – black – that fitted over his large, brutal hands like a second skin.

As an ex-pro wrestler, Henry Pierce appreciated the importance of a good costume and putting on a performance. He'd once toured the country, playing to packed houses under the guise of a Red Indian; entering the ring in a full feather headdress, warpaint, a tomahawk tucked into his trunks and a squaw by his side, to the accompaniment of tom-tom drums and loud boos from the crowd. Pierce was the arch villain of the ring, and a top draw until one night he got carried away and almost killed a fellow wrestler. Pierce treated life as if he was still in the ring, still the arch villain, still the performer. He'd just swapped the feather headdress and buckskins for black.

The sharp sodium wind pricked Pierce's scarred face. Scars he'd picked up years ago, but somehow they'd never weathered, just

remaining smooth, shiny and pink. A long stripe running from an ear lobe to his top lip sectioned off one quarter of his face. A spider's web on his cheekbone where the business end of a broken stout bottle had been plunged. His left eye resembled a rare bird's egg sitting in a nest – a nest of scars. A shard of glass had penetrated it, leaving it completely redundant: a speckled, marbled jelly with streaky blue and red blood vessels running through it. Sometimes he wore an eyepatch, other times he liked the feeling of unease it gave people when he looked at them. And for his line of work it was as good a tool for intimidation as a knife or a gun. He'd long decided that he liked his bad eye better than his good eye, but appreciated the fact that he needed the good eye to witness just how monumentally unpleasant the bad eye looked. He wouldn't swap it for the world, never mind for another good eye. And this is how Henry Pierce viewed the world.

He opened the rear door.

Jack Regent stepped out of the car, one foot hitting the pavement lightly, and one heavier foot following. The left foot was clubbed; he had a certain gait when he walked, but the club foot with its built-up shoe never affected his swiftness, never impeded him from what he had to do. And, like Henry Pierce, he'd learned to appreciate his physical disadvantage, but the club foot signified more than a few scars could ever achieve. For Jack had been born with it: a gift from God that marked him out.

The wind-driven snow had been falling steadily and had dusted the street white. A scattering of windows were illuminated with decorous Christmas fairy lights. The tall Georgian terraced town houses that lined St Michael's Place had long taken a beating, been slummed over and turned into walk-up flats. One- or two-bedroom dwellings with shared bathrooms and toilets located off shabby hallways.

The front door of number 27 had a red and green festive wreath attached to its heavy brass knocker. The door was off the latch and the two men made their way inside to the dark hallway. Without turning on the light, Jack made his way up the stairs. It

was on the stairs that Jack's heavy-booted foot pronounced itself, the light foot levering its way upwards, while taking the weight off the other, which then landed with a distinctive thud.

Four floors up and they were on the desired landing. Jack stood at the door he was about to enter and listened for signs of life . . . All he heard was his own breath, measured and calm. The climb had taken nothing out of him, nor did the thought of what he was about to do unnerve him. He stepped back a couple of paces, raised the clubbed foot, then hammered it home, sending the door flying off its lock.

Inside, the startled voices of a man and woman rudely awoken were heard. A light went on in a bedroom. A sliver of it escaped under the door and feebly illuminated the living room where Jack and Pierce now stood.

Jack scanned the room, which was tatty and depressing. Threadbare carpet, damp and mottled peeling wallpaper, cheap painted furniture. As an attempt at seasonal cheer, a small tinsel-covered Christmas tree stood in the corner of the room, shedding pine needles on to a handful of wrapped presents. Some cards stood on the mantelpiece.

'What the bloody hell is—!' A woman's voice, fearful, as she started getting out of bed and pulling on a dressing gown. The doorknob turned. Jack bolted to the door and entered the room before she could exit. The door slammed shut.

'No . . . please, God, no!' Her panic-pitched voice scorching the ceiling, but going nowhere.

Jack grabbed her hair and reeled her in towards him. Her long, shiny auburn tresses were wrapped around his hand like silk rope as he forced her to her knees. Her head was pulled back, the long white neck exposed, her green eyes wide open and so alive. Jack's other hand gripped the ebonized hilt of a long slim knife. Her cries quickly muted to gargles and bubbled out in blood as the knife sliced back and forth; fast, savage, severing the spine. Her lifeless body, almost in two parts now, fell to the floor.

Jack then turned his attention to the corner of the room.

And there he crouched, cowering on the floor. Bollock-naked and well and truly backed into a corner. He still had the sweat of his exertions with the woman upon him. No doubt he was cocksure, felt he could handle himself in the right circumstances. These weren't the right circumstances. He looked up at Jack, and the inevitability of it all took away some of the fear. He knew what was coming, because he knew Jack Regent.

Jack held the man's gaze as he approached, then slowly drew the knife down to the level of his face. With a steady hand he placed the tip of the blade on to the black pupil of the man's hazel eye. The pupil dilated and contracted – flashing on and off like an emergency signal. The tip of the blade slowly punctured the membrane that covered the jellied lens, yet still the man didn't squeeze his eyes shut, or even blink. He couldn't take his gaze off Jack, and time slowed for the kneeling man. His life didn't flash before him, because what he was watching was so much more compelling than anything that went on before – a front-row seat for his own execution.

Jack gave the man a soft smile, almost an *adieu*. And in one swift, powerful movement drove the knife into his eye, through the soft grey matter until it reached the bone at the back of his skull. His body juddered and twitched as Jack rotated and twisted the blade buried in his head; skewering his brain, shutting down the fear, the thoughts, the memories, until his life faded like a diminishing signal . . . over and out.

Jack came out of the bedroom, switching off the light. Henry Pierce eyed him admiringly. Hardly a drop of blood on the long, perfectly tailored camelhair overcoat. Pierce knew what came next. Whilst it wasn't exactly routine, this was how they'd done it before. Jack would depart and leave Pierce to get on with his work: the clean-up, the getting rid of the bodies. The tools were in the car. Cut them apart and bury them at sea. Pierce cracked his knuckles inside the black leather gloves, showing his readiness for the task ahead.

But Jack didn't go immediately, and leave Pierce to his work. He held out the knife and fixed him with a challenging look.

Henry Pierce took the weapon simply because it was offered to him. This unexpected gesture threw him slightly, and his heavy brow furrowed in confusion. He didn't know what came next, so he looked to Jack for further instruction.

Jack didn't say a word. He pulled out his silver cigarette case, took out another of his French cigarettes, put it to his lips and fired it up with the engraved gold lighter. The flame illuminated the dark hallway. Jack inhaled the rich smoke, then plumed it like an instruction towards the door.

Pierce was no longer confused; he had got the message. Sweat prickled his top lip. He quickly wiped it away with the back of one leather-clad hand. He knew Jack might take that for weakness – maybe even insubordination, a questioning of his judgement. Pierce gave him three slow, considered nods and conceded that it was the right thing to do. The only thing to do. By the time he reached the third nod, he wondered why he hadn't thought of this himself. But that was Jack, always one step ahead. It would join them, bond them in blood: a shared deed they would carry together to the grave. Pierce savoured this morbid thought. He gripped the knife tighter in a hand which still trembled. He reckoned even Jack could forgive him this minor weakness, considering what he was tasked with . . .

Jack left the flat. Pierce listened as those uneven footsteps faded away, heading down the stairs. He then headed towards the bedroom door and pressed his ear against it. The only sound he could hear was his own jagged breath. He opened the door. The room was pitch-black, seemingly windowless. No light from the street lamps below or the three-quarter moon above made its way into the room. But darkness, and whatever it held, never bothered Henry Pierce. Dressed in black, as always, he even felt an affinity with it.

The long knife in his hand remained steady now, as he stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER 1

LONDON

12 January 1964. Soho, London. Evening.

Detective Edward Tobin stepped into the Peek-A-Boo Club on Wardour Street. He badged the doorman, a slender young man in a cheap tux that left lots of spare room around the collar. Tobin badged him more out of habit than necessity. They'd met before, and the doorman knew his profession. He was expecting him. As Tobin was led through the club, he reflected on how Soho muscle wasn't up to much these days.

Tobin, on the other hand, measured five foot eleven inches, weighed in at about sixteen stone, and possessed noticeably more muscle than fat for a man who was a year off his police pension. He'd fought middleweight in the army and for the Met, and as they say – *and they always say* – he could have been a contender. He looked like an ex-pug. Punched and paunched out, with half-closed, narrow eyes, a spread nose, fat lips and – as he found out when he got his ticket out of Palookaville and fought Freddie Spinx at the Royal Albert Hall – a glass jaw.

The club was empty. Dark, low ceilings, cavernous. Small stage, about ten tables. The walls were lined with horseshoe-shaped booths recessed into faux-rock effect walls, with heavy black-velvet curtains that could be drawn around them for more

privacy. Tobin looked around the club. He'd been there many times before, but never with a dead body lying on the floor.

'Where's Duval?' he asked.

'In his office.'

'Then go and get him. And tell him to have my envelope.'

The slender bouncer sloped off.

Tobin went over to inspect the body on the floor. Male, mid-thirties. Suited. Thick head of brown hair on top of a thin, drawn, cadaverous face – which, of course, it now genuinely was. He had smooth skin which just served to accentuate the scores of scars he carried on his face, all varying in size and distinction. Three long razor cuts down his left cheek looked like the latest addition to this collection.

Tobin knew the corpse: Tommy Ribbons. He was 'a face' and a fixture in Soho. Tommy had a place in Berwick Street, the Author & Book Club. A two-room dive with a bar and a betting parlour upstairs. The only authors that hung out there were the authors of their own misfortune, in hock to books that carried columns of odds and wagers, not prose and poetry.

Ribbons wasn't his real name. He'd been given that nickname due to the scars he'd picked up over the years – literally cut to ribbons. His real name, long forgotten apart from on his extensive form sheet at West End Central, was Smithson. Thomas Albert Smithson. The extensive razor cuts to the face hadn't killed him, they were merely wounds he'd picked up two years previously. Tobin knew that because he had worked the case. Ribbons had close ties with the Maltese: he was married to a Maltese girl, and worked as muscle protecting their prostitution rackets in Soho. The Maltese were then trying to get a foothold in the lucrative West End slot-machine business. But two brothers from south-east London already in that business wanted to keep the monopoly, and had sent their emissary to etch their intentions clearly across Tommy's face.

What had killed Tommy Ribbons was plain to see: a twelve-inch carving knife buried to the hilt in his chest.

'Looks sort of funny, doesn't it?' said the voice behind Tobin.

Tobin looked around hoping to find Duval, but instead he found Detective Treadwell.

'I double parked,' said the young detective, knowing that would displease Tobin. It did.

Tobin wanted Duval here in the room before he wanted Detective Treadwell, because he wanted the envelope. That's why he'd sent Detective Treadwell off on a parking expedition.

'What the fuck's so funny about it?' he snarled.

'Laid out like that, looks sort of staged. A theatrical depiction of a murder victim.'

Tobin shook his head in mild disgust, major annoyance. 'What is this, then, some of your poncified university humour? What they call it – satire? Beyond the Pale?'

'Fringe, Eddie. *Beyond the Fringe*,' replied the young detective thoughtlessly, as he knelt down for a closer look at the body.

'Smart-arsed bunch of disrespectful public-school irons, the lot of them.'

'That's as maybe, Eddie, but you wouldn't get this going on in the Establishment Club.' He continued inspecting the body.

'Talk straight, Treadwell.'

'OK, how's this? The knife obviously stopped his pump straight away, accounting for the small amount of blood around the wound and hardly any on the floor. No signs of a struggle. His tie's still in place, so doesn't look like he's been in a fight. No cuts to the hands or arms, suggesting he didn't raise them to protect himself. Probably didn't think he had to. And by the time he did, it was too late. I'd say not only did he know his attacker, but he trusted him.' He glanced up at Tobin. 'Don't you think?'

'Nice way to start the New Year,' interrupted Lionel Duval, emerging from the beaded curtain that separated the back room from the main club. Sleek as a shark in a slate-grey suit, his perfectly coiffed silver hair put him in at around fifty; his smooth boyish features put him in at under forty; and the gold-framed tinted glasses that covered those cold dead eyes put him in as a

night-time operator. 'The Fourth Estate will love this shit. That Duncan Webb of the *People*, he'll be all over it like a bad case of the pox. Always looking for intrigue, that man.'

The irony wasn't lost on the young detective. As he stood up to greet Duval, he couldn't help but smile. 'A scarred-faced gangster found with a knife practically nailing him to the floor of a Soho clip-joint isn't exactly "cat stuck up a tree" material, Mr Duval.'

Duval was a study in indignation. 'Clip-joint? Eddie, who's the adjunct?'

'This is Detective Vince Treadwell and . . .' Before Tobin could finish, Duval had reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a wedge-heavy manila envelope. Tobin cut dead Duval's indiscretion by dipping his brow into a furrowed frown, raising his voice and putting him straight. 'Otherwise known as "Vinnie Clean Face".' Not subtle but effective. Duval went into reverse and slipped the envelope back into his pocket.

Tobin then felt the need to clarify the nickname, 'We call him that on account he's so young and fresh faced. A college boy.'

It was an apt description of the young detective, but a risible explanation of the moniker. Vince registered the point with a small cynical laugh, accompanied by an equally disdainful shake of his head.

'Oh, nice to meet you, Detective Tread . . . ?'

'Treadwell. Detective Vince Treadwell.'

'Tread-well. Detective Vince Treadwell,' Duval echoed, making a show of committing it to memory. Satisfied it had sunk in and been stored away, he pulled a big convivial grin, showing rows of expensively capped teeth. 'And please call me Lionel. All my friends call me Lionel.'

'You need Murder Squad, Mr Duval.'

Duval understood the message, but kept on grinning.

'So how come you called DS Tobin?' continued Vince.

Duval looked at Tobin for a lead, but none was forthcoming. Tobin wasn't that fast on his feet – not even in his boxing days.

'I called Eddie here because, well, he's an old acquaintance. And I knew he'd follow the correct procedures, deal with it in the proper manner. Murder Squad, Vice Squad, they're all much of a muchness to me. All you boys in blue, pinstripe, houndstooth or Harris fucking tweed for that matter are, like I said, Vince, friends of mine.' Laughing now, Duval offered Vince his hand.

Vince pointedly ignored it, gestured to the body and asked, 'So what happened here?'

The continued snubs appeared to be water off the shark's back. Duval's grin stayed fixed as he replied, 'Well, from what Colin told me—'

'Who's Colin?'

'The doorman,' replied Tobin.

Vince took out his notebook and started writing.

'Tommy Ribbons came in with two mates,' continued Duval. 'Maltese guys – dark, swarthy-looking buggers from all accounts. Nattering away in their lingo, ten to the dozen, you know how they do. They sat in the booth.' He pointed to the booth. 'Then they ordered some drinks off one of our lovely hostesses, the only one on duty at the time as it thankfully happens. When she returned with the drinks, the two swarthy fellas were gone' – Duval glanced down at the body '– and only he was left.'

'Where's the girl?' asked Tobin.

'I sent her home. She was in floods. In floods, she was, poor cow. She's new and she comes from Luton. Never seen a dead body, let alone one like this. Nice introduction to the bright lights, eh?'

'We'll need to talk to her,' said Tobin, 'and see if she got a good look at the dagos.'

Duval tut-tutted and shook his head, not in admonishment but simply to rectify that last statement. 'They were Maltese, Eddie. Dagos are Italians.'

'I thought Italians were wops,' replied Tobin. 'What's the difference?'

It was Vince's turn to shake his head. 'Nothing, Eddie. I think Mr Duval is just looking after you, wanting you to get your racial epithets right.'

Duval issued a mirthless laugh, then looked Vince up and down, reappraising the young detective. 'Oh, you're cute. Whippet-smart, and good-looking, too,' he said, nodding in wary admiration. 'Double cute.'

Vince ignored all this and carried on studying the stiff, kneeling again to take a closer look at the weapon that had put him there. 'Big knife, not the kind you'd carry around with you,' he said, looking up at Tobin, who knew Soho like the back of his fist. 'There's a hardware store on Greek Street sells kitchen supplies, right?'

Tobin nodded, his slitty eyes showing no enthusiasm for what Vince was saying.

'Maybe it wasn't planned. They saw Tommy, went and bought the knife, invited him for a drink somewhere dark and empty,' he continued, switching his attention to Lionel Duval. 'Somewhere not too many questions get asked, because they don't like the publicity, and they killed him there.'

'What's the adjunct saying, Eddie?'

Vince stood up. On its second mention, the word 'adjunct' had lost its charm.

Tobin raised two placating hands. 'He's saying nothing, Lionel. Just speculating.'

'Any other witnesses?' asked Vince. 'Punters?'

Duval shook his head, then qualified the gesture with, 'No, we'd only just opened. We don't attract the normal theatre crowd. We cater for a later clientele. A more adventurous punter, shall we say.' Again with the big convivial grin, topped off with a wink. 'All good dirty legal fun.'

'So I hear. Got any of it on film?' Vince asked.

Duval's grin turned into a grimace as he fixed Vince with a hard stare. 'Litigious little fucker, ain't he, Eddie?'

The club owner had himself recently made front-page news in the *People*, when a party at his Suffolk mansion had predictably enough turned into an orgy. But, more unpredictably, it was rumoured to have been filmed, with two-way mirrors and hidden cameras all over the gaff. Some fuzzy black-and-whites of a peer of the realm and a Russian diplomat being serviced by a rent boy and one of Duval's 'hostesses' had surfaced on Fleet Street. But the papers couldn't publish them – lots of arse shots but no faces.

'All good dirty legal fun,' echoed the smiling young detective, breaking off the staring competition with Duval and turning his attention to the booth where Tommy Ribbons had sat with his killers.

On the table, a candle stub was stuck in an empty wax-encrusted Mateus Rosé bottle but, like all the other candles in the joint, it hadn't been lit yet. Dark as it was, Vince reckoned the hostess must have seen Tommy Ribbons cop for the knife, but then Duval had straightened her out with a few quid to keep her mouth shut. Because that's what you do in Soho: look the other way and keep shtum. Killing a man in a Soho club was as safe a proposition for the perpetrator as using an empty back alley in a ghost town. Vince also figured, for what it was worth, and considering the 'keep shtum' policy that pervaded Soho, that Colin the doorman would have been standing by the neon-lit entrance, and therefore must have had a good look at the men.

He asked Duval, 'Where's Colin?'

'Out front, probably.'

Tobin to Vince: 'Why don't you go and fetch him. And call the incident in, whilst you're at it.'

Vince knew that Tobin wanted him out the room so he could finally pocket his envelope. He gave a slow, knowing nod to the two men, making his disapproval of the exchange clear.

Vince had been working Vice Squad, West End Central, for three months, now, and knew that envelopes were all part of the game. Like tips for the bin men at Christmas, that's how it was explained to him. But it was Christmas all year round for the Vice

coppers in Soho, as the clubs, clip-joints, pimps, prostitutes and porno peddlers paid up every week. Just to ensure that they weren't hassled every week. It was a sweet deal, and Soho had been pretty much wide open since the Messina brothers (three Sicilian white-slavers who had exerted a stranglehold over vice and prostitution in the West End for a good fifteen years) got pinched and deported in 1955.

Since then, the nefarious activities of the West End vice rackets had separated into lots of little parcels. Which is just the way Detective Eddie Tobin and his cohorts liked it, because those little parcels soon turned into lots of little envelopes. The envelopes provided insurance for men like Duval, the largest player in Soho. So when a curtain was pulled around a private booth at the Peek-A-Boo Club, and a hostess administered a blow job to a visiting Unilever business man, a Chancery Lane barrister or a Westminster politician, a Scotland Yard policeman wouldn't suddenly pop his head around the curtain and say, 'Peek-a-boo!'

Vince dutifully went off to get Colin the doorman, then that call to Murder Squad. Thus he let Eddie Tobin collect his regular envelope off Duval who, as dirty as he was, was not a true villain – he was too busy legitimizing himself through buying up his own little parcels of land in the lucrative square mile of Soho.

The club's reception area was small. Black-and-white glossies of the hostesses, in bikinis and various stages of undress, were tacked to the varnished, pine-panelled walls. Behind a small counter with a cash register on it, a flight of steep, narrow stairs wound their way up through the tall building. But no sign of Colin.

There was a distant cracking sound, with enough force and surprise that Vince's eyes darted up towards the ceiling. It seemed to emanate from somewhere at the top of the building. Vince suspected a door slamming shut. He stepped over to the stairwell to investigate, noticing an axe and a cosh secreted under the counter. He pressed a light switch on the wall, but the stairs remained dark.

Climbing to the first floor he encountered two doors, both of them locked. On the next landing up he could see a light. On

the second floor, a shadeless light bulb on its last legs intermittently illuminated the windowless landing. A card inscribed 'Artist's Model' was tacked on to a door and he could hear both the artist and the model at work. Breathless grunts from the artist, and fake groans of pleasure from the model.

Hand gripping the rickety wooden banister, he carried on climbing to the third floor, where the stairs then twisted up to a narrow landing. The knackered light bulb in the hallway below didn't have the strength to make its way up alongside him. Vince gave an involuntary shudder and he was glad Tobin wasn't there to see it. You never lose your fear of the dark, something deadly hiding in its layers. He stood stock-still for a moment, waited for his eyes to adjust and the blackness before him to dissipate, but finally saw there was nothing on this landing, not even a door.

He cautiously climbed the narrow stairs to the next level, where he could hear the whirring of a machine. It produced a soft but steady hum, as he reached the landing. There was a sliver of smoky-white light filtering through the gap under the door. The whirr of the machine seemed to emphasize a deep silence – then, from inside the room, came the sound of a girl screaming.

Vince tried the door handle, found it was locked. Working on the logic that, if the rickety banisters were anything to go by, the door should be a doddle. He focused on a spot just below the lock, and stepped back against the wall for maximum impact. He then lifted his right leg, pulling it back so his knee was just inches under his chin, then shot the heel of his shoe backwards into the door. The door splintered and cracked along the jamb, then burst open.

He stepped over the threshold and into a small room. On the metal shelves lining it were stacked canisters, containing reels of film. A projector sat on a tall metal table fitted with castors, as the machine projected a beam of white light that cut through the darkness and through a hole in the wall – down to where the girl's screams were growing louder and more desperate.

Vince made his way towards the cavity and peered through it to see a private cinema, containing just three rows holding about

twenty seats. Wall-to-ceiling carpeting served to insulate and deaden the sound as about ten men sat transfixedly staring up at the silver screen.

On the screen cavorted two men, either black or blacked up, their faces obscured by crazy-looking wigs and masks. Kitted out like B-movie savages, they were having brutal sex with a young white girl. She was bleach-blonde and junkie-thin, with needle tracks clearly dotted along her opaline arms. Her sun-starved skin displayed a mottled spectrum of pain in shades of black, blue, brown and yellow. Her red-rimmed eyes were vacantly doped up to the full.

The two men clearly weren't satisfied with the reaction they were getting off their zombie blonde, as they now began to punch her. Their punches weren't pulled, for there was real venom in their blows, real pain in her cries of distress. And Vince saw genuine fear trying to break through those glazed eyes, so he knew that this raping and beating wasn't just the usual pornographic play-acting. If it wasn't for the mocked-up jungle scenery – painted foliage, hanging ropes for vines, African shields and spears resting against a wall – it could have been happening live on a stage right now, and not through the filtered past of the movie screen . . .

All the stuffed envelopes in the world didn't cover this level of degeneracy, thought Vince. This wasn't one of the conventional blue movies and stag films that did the rounds of the private cinema clubs of Soho . . . He suddenly turned numb as he watched one of the men raise a knife . . .

Vince couldn't take his eyes off the screen, but he felt helpless to save the skinny girl. All he could do now was to stop the projector – but even that was too late, for her horrifying narrative had already run its course. This was just a record of it, and he was powerless to intervene as the inevitable played out before him. Nausea invaded his guts and started twisting and churning. Sweat prickled along his spine, and his whole body felt overwhelmed.

He was about to break the trance and heave the projector on to the floor, when he noticed a tall figure framed in the doorway.

The girl on the silver screen gave a final scream that trailed off into nothing.

The door slammed shut.

Then blackout.