

A SPENSER NOVEL

Robert B.
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**PALE
KINGS AND
PRINCES**



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Delacorte Press/New York

Published by
Delacorte Press
1 Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza
New York, New York 10017

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

**as always for Joan, and Dan, and
Dave, and this time too,
for Kathy**

**“I saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
Who cried—‘La belle Dame sans Merci
Hath thee in thrall.’”**

**John Keats, from “La Belle
Dame sans Merci”**

1

The sun that brief December day shone weakly through the west-facing window of Garrett Kingsley's office. It made a thin yellow oblong splash on his Persian carpet and gave up.

"Eric Valdez was a good reporter," Kingsley was telling me, "and a good man, but if he'd been neither he wouldn't deserve to die."

"Most people don't," I said.

"The people that killed Eric do," Kingsley said.

"Depends on why they killed him," I said.

"They killed him to keep the lid on the biggest cocaine operation in the East."

Kingsley was short and sort of plump. He needed a haircut and his big gray moustache was untrimmed. He had on a green and black plaid woolen shirt and a leather vest. His half glasses were halfway down his nose so he could stare over them while he talked. He looked like an overweight Titus Moody. He owned and edited the third largest newspaper in the state, and he had more money than Yoko Ono.

"In Wheaton, Mass?" I said.

"That's right, in Wheaton, Mass. Population 15,734, of whom nearly 5,000 are Colombians."

"My grandmother came from Ireland," I said. "Doesn't mean I deal potatoes."

"Potatoes aren't selling for \$170,000 a pound," Kingsley said.

"Good point," I said.

"After the war, some guy ran a clothing factory in Wheaton had relatives in Colombia in a town called Tajo. He started recruiting people from the town to work in the factory. After a while there were more people in Wheaton from Tajo than there were in Tajo."

Kingsley took a corncob pipe from one of his vest pockets and a pouch of Cherry Blend tobacco from another pocket. He filled the pipe, tamping the tobacco in with his right forefinger, and lit the pipe with a kitchen match from another vest pocket that he scratched into flame with his thumbnail. I shall return.

"Then a couple things happened," Kingsley said. "The clothing business in Wheaton went down the toilet—there's only one factory still operating—and cocaine passed coffee as Colombia's number one export."

"And Tajo is one of the major centers of export," I said.

Kingsley smiled. "Nice to see you keep up," he said.

"And Wheaton became Tajo north," I said.

"Colombians have been dealing with cocaine since your ancestors were running around Ireland with their bodies painted blue," Kingsley said. He took a long inhale on the pipe and eased the smoke out.

"Corncob's great," he said. "Don't have to break it in and when they get gummy you throw 'em away and buy another one."

"Go with the rest of the look too," I said.

Kingsley leaned back and put his duck boots up on the desk. There was a glitter of sharp amusement in his eyes.

"You better fucking believe it," he said.

"Probably drive a Jeep Wagoneer," I said. "Or a Ford pickup."

"Un huh," Kingsley said, "and drink bourbon, and cuss, and my wife has to tie my bow ties for me."

"Just folks," I said.

"We're the third biggest paper in the state, Spenser. And the tenth biggest daily in the Northeast and the big-

gest city in our readership area is Worcester. We're regional, and so am I."

"So you sent this kid Valdez down to Wheaton to look into the coke trade."

Kingsley nodded. He had his hands clasped behind his head and both feet on his desk. His vest fell open as he tilted the chair back and I could see wide red suspenders. "Kid was Hispanic, grandparents were from Venezuela, spoke fluent Spanish. Been a Neiman fellow, good writer, good reporter."

"And somebody shot him."

"And castrated him, probably afterwards, and dumped him along Route Nine near the Windsor Dam at the south end of Quabbin Reservoir."

"What do the cops say?"

"In Wheaton?" Kingsley took the pipe from his mouth so he could snort. "Valdez was a cock hound, no question, they say a jealous husband caught him."

"You don't believe it?"

"He's been a cock hound since he passed puberty. How come it got him in trouble a month after he started looking at the coke business in Wheaton."

"Castration sort of points that way," I said. "Cops got anybody in mind?"

Kingsley snorted again. "Chief down there is a blow-hard. Struts around with a pearl-handled forty-five. Thinks he's Wyatt Earp. Small-town bully is mostly what he is."

"Doesn't want a lot of outside help?" I said.

"Won't admit he needs it," Kingsley said.

"Honest?" I said.

Kingsley shrugged. "Probably, probably too stupid and mean to be bribed."

"How about the rest of the department? Coke is money and money is bribery."

"Cynical Mr. Spenser."

"Old, Mr. Kingsley."

"Probably the same thing," Kingsley said. "And proba-

bly right. I don't know. It's the kind of thing that Valdez was supposed to look into."

"And you don't want to send in more reporters."

Kingsley shook his head. "And get another one killed? They're journalists, not gunfighters. Most of them kids starting out."

"You figure I'm a gunfighter?" I said.

"I know what you are. I've looked into you very carefully. I'd like to hire you to go down there and see who killed that boy and tell me and we'll bring him to justice."

"Including if it was a jealous husband?"

"Yes."

"You have any copy that he filed?" I said.

"No, nor any of his notes."

"There should be notes," I said.

"There should in fact," Kingsley said. "But there aren't any. He'd been there a month, looking around, talking with people. There'd be notes."

"You know who he talked to?"

"No. Nor who he might have played around with, though in his case the best guess would be everyone. All I have is a photo of him, background on him. We gave him a long leash. We said go down, feel your way around, see what's there, take your time. Most papers need to make money. This one makes money but it doesn't need to. It's my toy. My grandfather made all the money any of us will ever need."

"You had him down there under cover," I said.

"More or less," Kingsley said.

"And me?"

"You can go down wide open," Kingsley said. "You're working for me and you can tell anyone you like, or nobody. This is what you know, I don't hire people and tell them how to work."

"You want to talk about money?"

"I don't care about money, tell me what you need up

front, and bill me for the rest when it's over. You won't cheat me."

"I won't?"

"No," Kingsley said, "you won't. I told you we've looked into you thoroughly. I know what you are."

"That's comforting," I said. "I've often wondered."

2

I was at the downstairs bar in the Parker House drinking Killian Red Ale with Rita Fiore, who was an assistant DA from Norfolk County and, myself excepted, the best-looking law person in Boston. In point of fact I wasn't exactly a law person anymore, and in point of more fact Rita wasn't drinking Red Ale with me. She was drinking Glenfiddich on the rocks and smoking long Tareyton cigarettes.

"The DEA guy's name is Fallon," Rita said. "I've known him two, three years, he's okay. Just don't talk too fast."

"Or use big words?" I said.

Rita nodded. Her thick reddish hair lay on her shoulders, and her tailored black suit fit snugly. Her stockings were patterned with flowers. Everything was nicely proportioned, very trim.

"You're looking better than you did last time I saw you," she said.

"Last time you saw me, I had just almost died," I said.

"That accounts for it. You better now?"

"Considerably," I said.

"Back with the sweetie?" Rita said.

"She prefers Susan," I said.

Rita drank some of her Scotch. "Sure," she said. "We never had our literate discussion."

I nodded.

"Literate and sexy discussion was what we had actually planned."

"I would have loved it," I said.

"But not now."

"Not now," I said.

Rita smiled. "Story of my life," she said. "Only the jerks stay unattached." She lit a cigarette with a butane lighter and dragged smoke in deeply and let it come out slowly.

"You're single 'cause you want to be," I said.

"I'm single 'cause only the jerks aren't attached," she said. "The unattached jerk incidence in the Boston-Cambridge area is a nationally recognized phenomenon. And occasionally, when you meet a nonjerk, he's in love with someone else, and somebody is shooting him."

"If it would have been easier for you I'd have been willing to skip the shooting," I said.

Rita dipped into her Scotch again. "Now you offer," she said.

I ordered another ale, Rita agreed to another Scotch. The downstairs bar at the Parker House was oak-paneled and clubby-looking with a small bandstand at one end and big photos of old-time Boston celebs on the wall.

"You're happy in your work," Rita said.

"Sure," I said.

"And the woman you love," she said.

"Certainly," I said.

She shook her head. "You insufferable bastard," she said.

"That too," I said.

A middle-sized man with reddish hair combed to one side stepped to the bar next to Rita. He wore gold-rimmed glasses.

"Rita," he said, "you get more lovely every day."

"Christ, Fallon," Rita said, "you say that every time you see me."

"Well, it's true," Fallon said, and winked at me, "every time I see you."

Rita smiled tiredly. "Spenser," she said, "Phil Fallon."

We shook hands. Fallon was wearing a gray suit and a blue shirt with a red and gray rep striped tie and black

wing-tipped shoes. He slid onto the barstool next to Rita. We were at the corner of the bar so that he was actually facing me when he sat.

The bartender came over.

"Beefeater martini," Fallon said. "Very dry. Stirred not shaken. Straight up with two olives, please." He looked at me. "Rita tells me you are looking into something out in Wheaton and wanted some input from me."

"That's true," I said.

"What do you want to know?"

"Tell me about the cocaine business in Wheaton."

Fallon's martini came, and he tasted it. He made a face and gestured to the bartender. "Too much vermouth," he said. "I want it capital D-R-Y."

"Sorry, sir," the bartender said and took it away.

"Wheaton," he said. "Interesting story. Little town in the middle of Massachusetts and there's probably more coke going through there than any place north of Miami."

"But you can't catch them."

Fallon shook his head. The bartender brought him a new martini. He sampled it. The bartender waited. In a minute they'd have the sommelier over. Fallon nodded. "Better," he said. He took another sip and set his glass down.

"No, in fact we can't catch them. We haven't got the manpower. What manpower we have is spread thin over the state. The agency's major effort is, of course, south Florida. Even there they are . . . I assume we're speaking here off the record?"

I nodded. Rita looked at me and rolled her eyes and finished her second Scotch.

"Even there," Fallon said, "we're undermanned. Around here, we're just barely showing the flag."

"But you know that Wheaton is a major coke plant."

"Services the whole Northeast. If we got a little more from the local police . . ." Fallon shrugged.

"They been corrupted?" I said.

"Maybe," Fallon said. "Small-town police departments are not normally equipped to stand up against the kind of money and know-how that cocaine represents."

"State cops?"

"Same problem we have," Fallon said. "There's a barracks in Brookfield, covers about twenty-five hundred square miles. Mostly they stick to highway patrol."

"So how does it work," I said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"How does the whole process work," I said. "It starts in Colombia . . ."

Fallon reached over and took one of Rita's cigarettes and put it in his mouth and picked up her lighter and lit the cigarette and inhaled it and let the smoke out slowly.

"Trying to quit," he said. "So far I've quit buying them."

He took a sip of his martini and settled forward with his forearms on the bar.

"Actually," he said, "it begins usually in Bolivia or Peru."

I knew that, but a guy like Fallon enjoys correcting you and I figured if I started with an error, it would prime his pump.

I said, "Oh."

"Sometimes Colombia, but mostly Peru and Bolivia. Coca grows best between fifteen hundred and six thousand feet. Needs a uniform mean temperature of about sixty-five degrees Fahrenheit. How technical you want this?"

"Had a little trouble for a minute there with Fahrenheit," I said, "but I'm okay."

He nodded, took another tiny sip of his martini. Rita drank some of the melted ice water in her glass and gestured at the bartender.

"There's farmers all over down there, cultivating coca leaves. A farmer gets about a hundred to a hundred fifty kilos of leaves, distills them down into about one kilo of dry paste."

Rita yawned. The bartender took her order for another round.

"The farmer usually deals with a guide, a kind of agent. If the farmer's Peruvian, the guide's the same. Brings the buyers, almost always Colombians, to the farmer. Meets them at the border and brings them in and agents the deal. None of them trust anybody but their own kind. Peruvians only deal through a Peruvian guide, Bolivians only through a Bolivian guide, you see?"

"Tribal," I said.

"Yeah, sure, they're about two hours out of the Stone Age up in some of those mountains down there. Anyway, the buyers take it back across the border into Colombia and process it at a base lab, that goes then to a bigger lab, near one of the cities, and gets turned into crystal."

The bartender brought the drinks. Fallon looked a little surprised to see his second martini. His first was only half sipped.

"I've fallen among hard drinkers," Fallon said.

"Adamantine," Rita Fiore murmured. Fallon glanced at her and frowned and then looked back at me and got back on ground he understood.

"Crystal is made out of base from all over. Like wild-flower honey, you know. It's just generic coke. They take all the base, dump it in together and process it. People talking about pure Colombian coke are blowing smoke. It's something their supplier tells them, makes them feel smart."

"When do we get to the Wheaton part, Phil." Rita was leaning her right elbow on the bar, her closed fist against her right cheekbone. She was into her third Scotch.

Fallon smiled. "Women," he said to me. "They want fast when you want slow, and they want slow when you want fast." He shook his head in puzzlement. Rita gazed into the mirror back of the bar.

"Anyway, we're getting to Wheaton," Fallon said. "Once they got crystal they smuggle it into the U.S.A."

Mostly in south Florida for obvious reasons. Sometimes they mule it in in small amounts. Sometimes it comes in three hundred kilos at a time. Usually the wholesaler goes to the point of entry, say some beach house in Florida, inspects the stuff, buys his share, and brings it home."

"Is Wheaton a home?"

"Probably," Fallon said. "Anyway, the wholesaler's got it in some safe house back home, say Wheaton. Then he weighs it, tests it, and this'll vary, but he may cut it, then he packages it and sells it to a distributor, who resells it in small lots to dealers. This guy may cut it too, or he may do the first real cut. The dealers cut it and subdealers cut it, and some was probably stolen along the way by guys working for the smuggler and replaced with a cut, and so by the time your sophisticated scholar athlete, say, gets a gram or two for his head it's about twelve percent cocaine. Hell, half the people doing blow are reacting to the cut, they get pure coke they think it's no good."

"Prices?" I said.

"Varies. Depends on how bad it's been stepped on along the way. At the moment, around here, a hundred, a hundred-twenty dollars a gram."

"What do they cut with?" I said.

"Oh, Christ," Fallon said. "Lidocaine, mannitol—which is a baby laxative—lactose, sucrose, vitamin B, caffeine, speed, benzocaine, stuff we haven't figured out yet."

"Could we focus on Wheaton a little more," I said.

"Focus," Rita said, "they don't even know us."

"Who doesn't know us," Fallon said.

Rita smiled and shook her head.

"Wheaton," I said.

"Town's got a twenty-man police force, three detectives. In the last year we've made sixteen arrests in coke traffic that have ties to Wheaton. People we arrest in other places have bank accounts in Wheaton, they own bars in Wheaton, they have relatives in Wheaton. There's ten-

year-old kids coming into banks in Wheaton and buying bank checks for nine thousand dollars."

"Good paper route?" I said.

"Sure," Fallon said. "Place is a sewer, but all the manpower goes to Miami. It's the glamour spot, you know. The plum assignments are there, the press coverage is there. We're up here sucking hind tit." He looked at Rita.

Rita drank some Scotch while exhaling smoke and the squat glass of amber liquid looked like a small witch's cauldron when she put it down, with the smoke drifting off the surface of the Scotch.

"So I'd appreciate any help you can give us," Fallon said to me.

"Sure," I said.

"Like what have you got so far," Fallon said.

"Reporter for the *Central Argus*, kid named Eric Valdez, went over to Wheaton to do some investigative reporting and got shot and castrated."

"He was investigating cocaine?"

"Yes."

"His death cocaine-related? I haven't seen anything."

"Local cops say it was personal. Valdez was fooling around with someone's wife."

"They know whose wife?"

"Not that I know of. Valdez was supposed to be something of a womanizer."

"Where was he when I needed him," Rita said.

"And the paper hired you to go down and look into it?"

"Yeah."

"Be careful," Fallon said. "A man alone doesn't have much chance."

"Thank you Harry Morgan," I said.

Fallon looked puzzled again. "*To Have and Have Not*," Rita said to him. He still looked puzzled. Past his shoulder at the foot of the stairs, I saw Susan. She was wearing a broad-shouldered red leather coat with the collar turned up.