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—Roger Moorhouse, author of *Berlin at War*

IKE AND KAY

A Novel

James MacManus

Author of *Midnight in Berlin*

OVERLOOK

then picked up another one.

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June 1942

He had come back, of course.

She had read of his appointment in *The Times*. The announcement from the White House stated that General Dwight Eisenhower had been promoted to Commander of European Theater of Operations. The news was given front page coverage and was announced on the BBC in news bulletins throughout that day, 24 June 1942. She had ringed it in red in her diary. She knew exactly how long he'd been away because she'd eaten one chocolate a day from the box he'd given her. There were two layers, and when she ate the last one three weeks had passed.

She had been driving a very different American in the meantime, General Tooey Spaatz, commander of the US air forces in Britain. She loved the name, which made him sound like a mad comedian from the music hall era, but sadly Spaatz was a grimly silent character who never offered her a word of thanks. When he did speak, it was from the back of the car, and only to ask how long it would take to get to their destination. She would give an estimate and he would snap back, "Make it faster." She began to feel more like a fighter pilot than a staff car driver.

He had a suite at Claridge's which at any time of the day or night resembled the Hollywood version of a cocktail party – the smoke, the noise, the badges of high rank on the men's uniforms and the smart dresses of the women, many of them actresses who had come straight from West End shows, created an atmosphere completely at odds with his coldly impatient character. He would stride through the mêlée, shaking hands, making brief conversation here and there, greeting well known names from the stage, and then vanish into a small sitting room. She would accompany him, as was her duty, and for an hour or more she would sit there while he slumped into a chair at a desk, occasionally picking up a document to read and then sighing deeply. But mostly he sat back gazing at the ceiling. He would do this for what seemed like an eternity, and then he would look up, seemingly surprised to see her, and say, "Thanks, Kay, I guess I won't be needing you any more tonight."

The scene was repeated several times during the four weeks she served him, and she learnt to take books and magazines with her to fill the silent hours. She also understood that the long periods of concentration were the general's way of coping with the deaths of his young countrymen, whose names and ranks clattered into his office every day on the teleprinter.

The US Eighth Air Force had by then joined the RAF in large-scale daylight raids on Germany, and initially losses were high. Every week new planes fresh from factories across America arrived at British airbases, while ships unloaded the bombs, bullets and spare parts with which they would be armed and serviced. Young American pilots, bomb-aimers, navigators, gunners, aircrew, mechanics and armourers also arrived in their thousands.

They were young, fresh-faced kids with the minimum of training. Most of them had never left their home state before, let alone been abroad. She could tell he felt they were his responsibility, that too many were dying in the skies over Europe.

Then came one fine summer evening when she pulled up outside the hotel and General Spaatz flung himself into the back of the car almost before it had stopped. "Northolt airport," he barked. "And step on it."

She knew not to ask why, but drove with her hand on the horn all the way out through west London to the new airport that was being carved out of farmland. She understood the reason for the hurry the moment she arrived. A long line of VIPs were lined up beside steps alongside the runway. A B2 bomber had just landed and was taxiing slowly to the greeting party. It came to a halt, and scarcely had the propellers stopped turning than the doors were opened and a broad-shouldered figure with a big smile stepped out and down the steps. Eisenhower was back.

He had three stars on his shoulders now, she noted; he was commander of the "whole shooting match", as he put it later. He shook hands with the VIPs and then noticed her standing by the car. He came over straight away, trailed by Spaatz, who was his usual unsmiling self.

"Kay, how are you?" he said. "I gather Tooev here has been hiding you in the air force. You want to drive for me again?"

Spaatz spared her the embarrassment of a reply. "Now don't take Kay away from me," he growled. "She's the only driver I've found who really knows London."

Eisenhower just laughed.

"I have some fruit for you, Kay," he said and walked away.

The next day a basket of bananas, mangoes and peaches arrived on her desk. The following morning she was asked by a grumpy General Tooev to train a replacement driver. He seemed genuinely sad to see her go and shook her warmly by the hand.

A week later she presented herself at General Eisenhower's Grosvenor Square headquarters. She was late. A marine guard had refused her entry and then another marine on the reception desk made her wait half an hour while making several telephone calls.

The name Eisenhower may have been trumpeted across the nation by the BBC, but no one in the American embassy seemed to know where he was. Kay finally found herself outside a large oak door glistening with a coat of recent varnish. A stencilled notice carrying the words *Theater Commander* hung from a hook on the door.

She checked her face and hair in a vanity mirror and was about to knock when she noticed the varnish was far from dry. She gave the door a gentle tap with the toe of her shoe and entered on a barked command from within.

Eisenhower was seated at a desk from which smoke rose in a long plume from a

cigarette smouldering in an ashtray. A cigarette between his fingers added to the hazy atmosphere. Even the windows seemed smeared with a yellow patina of nicotine. Beyond the trees on the square flaunted green canopies which swayed gently in the breeze.

The desk was piled high with box files on one side and two stacked wire mesh trays overflowing with correspondence on the other. A blotting pad lay between them. Eisenhower was staring at a noticeboard covered in green felt which stretched the length of one wall. Memos in paper of various colours, some typewritten, others handwritten in an illegible scrawl, were pinned to the board.

Kay coughed. "I'm sorry I'm late," she said. "I had trouble getting in."

Eisenhower frowned, looked at her and said, "Yeah, I know, it's chaos around here."

He took a drag from his cigarette, stubbed it out and looked at the wire trays. His frown deepened.

"Thank you for the fruit," she said.

"Don't thank me," he said. "I just want to know whether you can drive for me – for good this time."

"Of course I can. You just have to sign a document and ..."

Eisenhower cut her short. He rose from his chair, picked up a wire basket and let it drop to the desk with a thud, sending a snowdrift of papers fluttering to the floor.

"I came here to fight a war, not sign bits of paper! Get the car and let's get out of here."

And that's how it started, in a smoky room with missives and memoranda of war scattered across the walls, the floor and the desk, while through the window the summer foliage of ancient trees murmured a rebuke at the smoky chaos around the new commander.

The war seemed like thunder from distant mountains that summer. The blitz of London and the big cities was not over but had lessened to a point where people accepted the raids as they did rationing – "just one more bloody thing to put up with" summed up the war-weary mood among the populace.

The newspapers were full of the campaigns in North Africa where British and German armies seemed to take turns to advance and retreat and the name of the garrison port of Tobruk became a symbol first of British defiance and then of another defeat.

Eisenhower moved through a daily routine that rarely varied: breakfast at Claridge's followed the inevitable complaint to the kitchen about the lack of strong, steaming black coffee; then to the embassy, on to the War Office and back to the embassy for a sandwich-on-desk lunch and more coffee. Twice a week red circles in the diary announced lunch or dinner with Churchill at Downing Street.

Kay drove him everywhere even on what would otherwise have been short walks. Eisenhower's face and uniform were by now well known to Londoners. Churchill had finally persuaded him not to walk the streets of the city. The prime minister insisted that there were enemy agents in London who would happily take a knife or a gun to the commander if they saw him.

"Complete nonsense," Ike told Kay, "but I've got to keep the old man happy."

Kay felt like a character in a play that summer in which her boss, as she called him, bestrode the stage and various players came in from the wings to take up their lesser roles.

There was Butch – Harry Butcher – very much the star of the ensemble, who handled the press. Colonel Ernest Lee from Texas, known to all as Tex, looked after the office, while “Mickey”, Sergeant Michael McKeogh, was Ike’s valet, personal orderly and part-time cook.

Ike called this his family and he treated them with the care, attention and occasional bad temper that he would his own children.

“And you’re family now,” he told Kay.

She was surprised and a little nervous at the designation. The others in the team would hardly welcome a mere driver and a half-Brit, as they called her, into their ranks.

“Thanks boss, that’s great to hear.”

“I mean it,” he said. “You’re a member of the team. Where are we going, by the way?”

They were driving west out of London after a familiar explosion and the cry of “Get me out of here!” The reason this time was not any of the myriad military and political problems that flowed from the mysterious code word “Torch”, but the pressure placed on the commander by London’s society ladies.

London’s society ladies, starved of eligible males and anxious for the prestige of transatlantic celebrity, showered the American embassy with invitations to luncheons, cocktail parties and dinners. Tempting inducements were handwritten on the margins of the stiff cardboard invitations: Noel Coward would be attending a cocktail party right across from the embassy in Grosvenor Square; a brilliant new actor called Laurence Olivier would be among guests at a very small dinner party.

Telephone calls followed and then supposedly chance meetings took place in the foyer of Claridge’s. It proved too much. Kay suggested a move to the Dorchester.

“It’ll be the same there. If I hear another Brit lady calling me her daahling general I’m going to explode. I’ve got to get out of town.”

That morning late in July, with the sun doing its best to convey a sense of summer, she drove him west out of London, skirting the Thames.

“Look up there,” she said, pointing to Windsor Castle. Ike was boyishly excited by the sight of ancient turrets and ramparts and the royal standard flying from the towers.

“Straight out of Disney,” he said.

Kay too was excited. She was family. The others might not like it, but she had joined Eisenhower’s inner circle of those he trusted best and worked with closely.

She deserved it, she told herself; it was a fair reward for the hours spent waiting in the Packard and the guidance she gave him about the hidden history of London and the arcane social habits of the English upper classes.

He had almost dismissed her as his driver when she told him that he could not smoke at formal dinners before the royal toast at the end of the meal. Every man Kay had ever known smoked cigarettes, pipes and occasional cigars, but she had never know a smoker like Eisenhower. Part of her duties lay in ensuring the day began with at least three packs of Marlboros in her handbag. By the end of the day he would always have smoked his way through them all.