

As he dragged her across to the slipway that led down from the beach, off the stones and into the crashing waves, he looked up at the Esplanade.

Sally still stood, watching him. He gave her a quick wave.

She waved back – but then disappeared from view behind the railing.

Gone back to the pub, he assumed and, for a second, he wondered if he was doing the right thing here.

Did he *really* care about that boat out there? Or was it just to show off to Sally?

No, he knew this was a duty. The lifeboat station just along the beach had closed years ago. No time to alert the lifeboat at Selsey.

If the boat was in peril, he might be the only one who could help.

And if they were up to something they shouldn't be on the wreck – likewise – he'd be the one to uncover it.

He fixed the jib, the lines, and sheets.

That was the easy bit: shoving the little boat into the crashing sea, setting the sail, jumping aboard and dropping the keel. This sea would test every inch of his experience.

Minutes later, he was ready to go.

He turned one last time to see if Sally was there.

But no, she had disappeared.

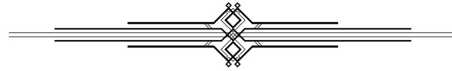
A movement along the Esplanade caught his eye though.

Somebody else was up there, hurrying along by the railing – crouched down; just a dark figure in a coat.

No time to wait to see who it was.

He grabbed the rope and pulled the little boat down towards the black, heaving sea.

3. A Garden Party



Harry looked around at the guests spread out on the great lawn of Stoke Manor, doing the classic balancing act of a champagne flute in one hand and a tasty morsel of some kind in the other. White-uniformed servers circled the group, attending to their needs.

He saw Kat taking it all in as well; she had not been to many big local gatherings like this. Not really her cup of tea – *or his for that matter*. Still, when Aunt Lavinia had asked them – *strongly* – to attend, how could they say no?

“It’s for a *good cause*, Harry,” she had said earlier in the summer. “The Arundel Children’s Fund – a charity close to my heart. The tickets cost a *fortune*, and there will be an auction where everyone – including your good selves, of course – will bid far too much for things they neither need nor want.”

Harry had known better than to argue with his aunt – but as he now plucked two glasses of champagne from a passing silver tray and handed one to Lavinia, one to Kat, he wished he were *anywhere* but in this boisterous crowd on such a perfect afternoon.

“I must say,” said his aunt, taking the champagne and scrutinising the gathering. “Everyone who is *anyone*, has turned up. And look, Harry – see, over there?”

Lavinia pointed down to the river, where the manicured lawn gave way to a path flanked by tall grasses – feathery phragmites, from the look of them – that led to a jetty and an old boathouse. Moored alongside the jetty, an impressive motor launch, its polished wood gleaming in the sun.

And standing by the launch, chatting in a small group, he saw a familiar face.

“Even your good friend Nicola is here.”

Nicola Green was *indeed* a very good friend to both him and Kat. Kat volunteered with Nicola’s Women’s Voluntary Service, helping women of the area in all sorts of difficult situations.

“Yes, Harry,” Kat said, grinning. “If Nicola is attending, I’m sure it’s *quite* all right for us to *while away* this sunny afternoon here.”

“Besides,” Lavinia continued, “All the proceeds benefit so many of the local towns and villages, not just Arundel.”

“The bubbly isn’t too bad either, my husband,” Kat said.

“Yes. But, you know, I’ve never been a great one for all this smiling and ‘small talk’.”

“Nonsense,” Lavinia said, with a grin. “I know you can do whatever you set your mind to. Even *chit-chat*.”

Harry turned and looked at Kat. She *did* seem to be enjoying the champagne, and, well, she also looked rather amazing in her afternoon party dress. Harry caught more than few people looking over, clearly wondering “who is she?”

Harry *always* enjoyed that.

He turned back to Lavinia who took a bite of a small pastry item filled with something creamy, and grabbed another before the tray had gone.

She said, “These little canapes? Rather tasty I must say.”

“All right then. Points made, Lavinia. But maybe you can also *point* out some of the players in this game, as it were? For example... the host? Not sure I’ve had the pleasure.”

“Ah, yes. Valentine Roper. Inherited the whole Stoke Estate a few years back. There he is, over there, with that young-ish crowd.”

Harry looked over. Roper was perhaps early forties; black hair slicked back under a straw boater; a white and pink rowing blazer, with a tie Harry didn’t recognise; pale blue shirt, perfect for a summery day.

Around him, a circle of young women and men chatted and laughed loudly.

“Seems a rather popular fellow,” Kat said. “Do you know him, Lavinia?”

“*Knew* his parents years ago. Pleasant couple, solid county types. Save, rumour has it, when they passed away, the estate found itself owing an *ungodly* amount of taxes.” Lavinia looked around to check she was out of earshot. “Turns out the farm business that supported the whole place, had been rather *let go*. Money was tight, and all that?”

“Really?” Harry said. “With a ‘do’ like this, Mr Roper doesn’t appear to be struggling now.”

To which Lavinia didn’t have an answer.

“He’ll be running the auction himself so you’ll get to see him in action, so to speak.”

“That reminds me, Aunt Lavinia, what did *you* put up for auction?”

“Oh, nothing of consequence. Barely a diversion. Tour of Mydworth Manor, its so-called art and treasures, followed by a formal dinner with the ‘lady of the house’.”

Kat laughed. “Meaning you?”

“Yes. Can’t imagine it will fetch *that* much. It was either that or sacrificing some of the family silver. And one *does* have one’s limits, even for charity, you know? And you two?”

“Ah. Well, you see Kat and I have been hard at work getting old *Boreas* ready for sea.”

“Yes, I heard about that. Wilcox at the boatyard overseeing the work?”

“Doing a damn fine job too. Top-notch shipwright. Anyway, tomorrow, looks like that work will be all done.”

“So,” Kat continued, “we offered a ‘grand afternoon cruise’, with champagne and an elegant lunch on the restored boat.”

“*That* actually sounds rather lovely. Mind if I come? I used to know my way around such things, you know?”

“I know you did, Aunt Lavinia,” said Harry, smiling, as a childhood memory of his aunt swinging precariously atop the mast of the *Boreas* suddenly surfaced.

He turned to his wife and saw her looking into the distance. He could tell immediately that her mood had *changed*.

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Kat saw a man walking up from the field where all the cars were parked. He was alone, which she didn’t think odd, but the way he walked...

Such a grim pace... as if in no mood for this afternoon party.

“Lavinia, um... See *that* man over there? Looking rather... stolid. Know him?”

Lavinia turned to look, as the man reached the edge of the lawn and stopped.

“Oh, Mr Mackay? Sad story that.”

“Yes?” Kat said.

“Well, I’m sure you heard about that young chap, a few weeks ago... Ewan Mackay? Took his boat out at night.”

“Rough sea that evening, I read in the paper,” Harry said,

“Right. *That’s* his father. Seems the boat was found. But not young Ewan.”

“The father – he’s all alone?” Kat said.

“Understandable,” said Lavinia. “I imagine his wife... well could *you* bear coming to a party? After a loss like that? He probably felt duty-bound. He’s on the committee I believe.”

But Kat noticed something else. No one seemed to be going over to him. As if, in the wake of his sadness, his loss was too much for people.

Which – *not surprisingly*, Kat thought – led Lavinia to say, “I shall have a word with the poor fellow. And see you at the auction?”

Kat watched Lavinia head across the lawn, expertly picking another couple of champagne glasses from a passing tray as she approached Mr Mackay.

“I do love your aunt. That way she has...”

“Somehow knowing how someone else feels, and then responding?”

“Exactly.”

“Yes. *That’s* Lavinia.” Harry looked away for a moment as if a stray thought had appeared – something else, from some other time.

Then she saw the host, this Valentine Roper, move with his entourage to a gaily decorated podium in front of the house.

All smiles, his glass refilled, as he gazed at his lawn facing the river, dotted with well-dressed, well-heeled and hopefully – for the benefit – *well-funded* guests.

And then the auction began.

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Kat watched as Valentine presented each auction item with a steady enthusiasm.

“You know,” Harry said, leaning close to her, “that Roper fellow could have a career in this line of work. Christies, perhaps? Or maybe a carnival somewhere? *Quite* the showman.”

Kat nodded, but she also watched the crowd, especially those close to Valentine – all of them on the young side and stylishly dressed in a way that, from her limited experience, didn’t seem *at all* like Sussex.

The young women in smart, brightly-coloured dresses with cute bowl-shaped hats; some with feathers, others sparkling, dotted with sequins. The men near them in crisp beige and tan slacks, with matching vests and light-coloured shirts, unlike the boaters and blazers that most of the locals seemed to be wearing.

Kat had a good idea of the current styles and fashions in London and she guessed this set – Roper’s friends? – must have come down to Arundel for the weekend.

Then Roper came to the next item on the printed auction list.

The afternoon cruise on Harry’s sailboat – the *Boreas* – complete with hors d’oeuvres and champagne.

“Now, *come along* my friends. I do believe the generous donors of this wonderful prize are here with us today, so let’s make *this* one of the biggest for the Children’s Fund! Do I hear ten guineas? Fifteen? No time to be shy, ladies and gentlemen!”

And, indeed, the bids came fast, then slowed, started to waver and then – after a dramatic last-minute flurry – settled at an impressive fifty guineas.

“Going once, going twice... and *there* we are! The fabulous sailboat excursion with Sir Harry and Lady Mortimer goes to Colonel Templeton and his delightful wife, Beatrice.”

Kat could *see* the winning couple – looking as if they had planned their party outfits to match; the pear-shaped Colonel with his red face, mustachio and broad grin; his wife clutching her handbag as if it held the funds for their exorbitant bid – turn and sheepishly wave at them.

“Ah,” Harry said, giving a polite smile and a wave back, “so *there* is the couple we’re destined to spend hours at sea with.”

“They *do* seem pleased,” said Kat, trying not to laugh. “It will be fun, won’t it?”

“I wonder if I can get someone else to play captain. Maybe...”

“Sorry, Harry dear, the listing specifically says that *we* will host.”

“Well, all for a good cause, I suppose. Now, where’s Aunt Lavinia? I do believe her little *dîner à deux* is next up on the race card.”

As if on cue, Lavinia appeared at Harry’s side – but Kat sensed immediately from the expression on her face that she wasn’t here just for the auction.

“Ah – I’m so glad I caught you,” Lavinia said.

“Oh, we wouldn’t dream of leaving yet,” said Harry. “We plan on bidding for that candlelit dinner with you. Get the thing off to a good start, you know.”