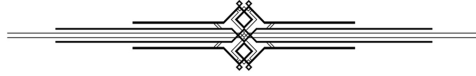


2. The Sussex Downs



Harry knew Kat well enough to know that she *definitely* could have ideas.

Nothing shy about her there.

“You get in that car there, go to London, have the meeting,” she said. “Solve the crisis.”

He laughed at that. “We tend to take our time solving crises around here.”

He looked across – driver waiting. The lorry, loaded with their trunks, started to pull away.

“And,” she said slowly, “I’ll drive to our new home.”

I should have seen that coming, thought Harry. The Alvis...

“Ah, right. Yes, but you see, Kat—”

He felt her bluer-than-blue eyes locked on him.

“The roads here, deuced tricky,” he said. “Narrow as hell. And every now and then we have these fiendish tunnels – railway bridges, you see? Only one lane, cars coming right at each other. Take your life in your hands—”

Kat put a hand on his arm. With that touch he felt as if he had already lost the argument.

“*Harry.* I’ve driven the back streets of Cairo, Istanbul, Rome. I think I can deal with whatever you have here. Road atlas in the glove compartment, right?”

He nodded. Still, he thought, worth one last attempt.

“We also drive on the left. Have you ever driven on the *left*?”

“Left, right – same thing. I’ll get to the house. Make sure our things are properly unloaded and put away, maybe meet this housekeeper you keep telling me about.”

“Dear Maggie. You *will* like her.”

“I’m sure. So... it’s decided.”

For a moment, he stood there. Harry had on occasion seen the odd stray American dealing with roads here. *Terrifying sight.*

“B-but then out in the country, there’s the hedges, and, well, a protocol for letting cars pass, and—”

“Protocol? I know all about protocols.”

Then she took a step closer to him, her voice low. A voice that again reminded him of when he first met her.

Fell for her.

“I’ll be fine.”

Harry nodded, the issue settled. “All right then, well, I’d better get going. Be safe. I’ll get the first train to Mydworth that I can. Pick up a cab at the station. Hopefully home not *too* long after the cocktail hour.”

“You’d better be. First night, new home. Been looking forward to this.”

“Me too. Well—”

He fired a look at the Alvis. Then back to Kat.

A kiss – not caring who on the dock looked.

“All right. Gotta dash.”

And at that, he turned and hurried to the official car – door open, ready to go.

As he took a seat in the back, he could see Kat standing there, a smile on her face.

Then, with a last wave to her, the car pulled away from the dock, off to London.

*

Somewhere between Newhaven and Mydworth, Kat pulled off to the side of the road for a breather – acutely aware that she’d taken Harry’s warnings much too lightly.

At first, as usual, it had been thrilling to be at the controls of the big car, the roads wide enough, the sun high, the sky blue, the sea sparkling as she drove west along the coast road towards Brighton.

Hardly any traffic, apart from sensible sedans chugging along, local delivery trucks, buses, horses and carts.

All of which she passed with graceful ease and a quick toot on the horn.

Then Brighton – the promenade road passing lines of elegant hotels and villas – and heads turning at the throaty roar of the Alvis’s sporty engine.

She loved that. *This car makes an impression.*

This was England. The England she’d read about as a child and seen in so many movies. And she, Kat Reilly – daughter of a Bronx bar owner no less – was now driving through its famous towns in a shiny green sports car like a movie star, sunglasses on, hair flying in the warm air.

Kat Reilly, she thought.

Now there’s a question. Am I still Kat Reilly? Or will I answer to the name – Lady Mortimer?

In this day and age? Hmm.

That was a discussion for later. Maybe after cocktails.

But then – barrelling through one stone tunnel a little faster than was appropriate – she’d nearly sent the front end of the roadster crashing into the grille of an oncoming local bus, the driver firing an angry glance as tyres screeched and he barely slid past, the precious Alvis inches away from the stone wall.

Heart pounding from the near-miss, Kat had stuck tight to the left side of the road as the bus rumbled on, spewing smoke from the rear, passengers gawking out of the back windows at the unfamiliar sight of a speeding sports car.

And perhaps the even more unfamiliar sight of a woman driving it?

Well, she thought, staring out across fields of wheat in the late afternoon sun. *That's one lesson learned.*

Railway bridges in England *can* be tricky.

Then she released the handbrake, hit the gas, spun the wheel and gunned the Alvis back onto the road, a glimpse of dust clouds from the back wheels in the mirror.

*

Harry stared at the Houses of Parliament, as the car glided across Westminster Bridge.

Big Ben was just striking five o'clock. As Kat would say, "*helluva time to have a meeting.*" Already the pavements thronged with office workers, clerks, businessmen, all heading home, the weekend ahead.

He'd not been back in London for a couple of years – the posting in Cairo, a constant series of six-month extensions.

And now, watching the open-top buses jostling for space with cabs, cars, lorries, motorbikes, horses and carts as they all negotiated Parliament Square, he felt that old familiar thrill at being part of the hustle and bustle again.

There were a lot of great cities in the world, but none (so far!) as exciting as London. Newspaper boys calling out the evening edition of *The Post*. An old soldier, with a cap on the pavement, playing gypsy violin. A messenger boy leaping onto the rear platform of a bus as it flew by. A gaggle of laughing girls buying ice-cream from a street barrow.

How he loved this city!

He couldn't wait to share it with his new wife – the frantic fun of the place – the bars, clubs, restaurants, theatres, tea rooms, Royal Opera House, dances...

Kat – he knew – would love it as well.

And just as soon as he and Kat were settled in Mydworth, he'd bring her up here, spend a whole week in his little *pied-à-terre* in Bloomsbury, hit some parties, take advantage of his new life of semi-leisure.

Between London and Mydworth, he and Kat would have the best of both worlds. Perfect!

"Sir," said the driver – and Harry realised they'd arrived in King William Street, at the main entrance of the Foreign Office, the pavement filled with a steady stream of office workers heading home.

Harry quickly climbed out. With a nod to the driver he watched the car draw away while he adjusted his jacket and tie.

Hardly the sober affair he'd usually wear to the office – but, dammit, they'd just have to put up with it.

He turned and stared up at the enormous building that stretched all the way from Parliament Street to Horse Guards Parade.

Forget Parliament... Downing Street... this was the *real* hub of the British Empire.

And now, in theory, his place of employment for the next few years.

He climbed the steps, against the flow of departing workers, grinned at the familiar policeman who stood, arms behind his back, guarding the entrance.

“Evening to you, Arthur!”

“Sir Harry! So good to see you back.”

“Wonderful to be back.” Harry looked up at the building. “I’ve certainly missed this place. And how’s Marjory and the offspring?”

“Mustn’t grumble, sir.” A grin. “Not too much, at least! Little ’uns keep me young.”

“Oh, I’m sure they do,” said Harry smiling back.

And through the revolving doors he went, into the grand main entrance.

With luck, he thought, I’ll be out of here by six-thirty, catch the seven o’clock from Victoria, Mydworth by eight, then gin and tonics with Kat in the Dower House garden.

*

Kat had to admit it. She was completely lost.

The road she’d been on had climbed in sweeping curves higher and higher through dark wooded hills, until finally the gaps in the trees had opened to reveal a dizzying plateau of high, rich, farmland, with the sea maybe thirty miles away – a distant band of silver.

But somehow it was wrong. She was way off target.

She pulled over, turned the engine off and sat in the warm silence, suddenly forgetting the drive ahead, trying to let the tranquillity and peace of the English countryside wash over her. *Just for a few minutes, she thought.*

Her eyes began to close.

Whoa – Kat – wake up!

She shook her head clear and got out of the car. Then she picked up the map from the front seat and opened it fully on the low front hood of the car, trying to decode the way forward.

Surely, she couldn’t be more than ten miles away from Mydworth? But the roads on the map looked more like the twisty weave of a badly knitted sweater starting to unravel.

Then she heard a *rumble*. Some kind of machine.

She looked up from the map, late afternoon sun ahead. For a country that she always heard was cloudy and gloomy all the time, the sky a deep blue. Quite beautiful.

The machine making the “rumble” came into view, emerging from a field of tall wheat just yards away.

An old tractor. Red, rusty paint peeling all over, and pulling a wooden cart behind it with a sheepdog peering over the side. The tractor steadily belched puffy grey smoke into the sky and as it got closer, the driver nodded.

Kat smiled at the man in his cap, a few days growth of beard, quizzical expression on his face.

She raised a hand.

“Excuse me. But, um, I’m wondering—” She gestured at the map. She was struggling to be heard over the rumbling engine. She said it louder. “Could you maybe, um, *show me—*” Again – to the map – even louder. “Trying to get to Mydworth!”

The man, perched so many feet higher than her, slowed the already crawling tractor until it stopped. Then, with a wheezing cough from the engine, he shut it off.

“American, hmm?” he said. “Wot you doin’ here?”

“Um. Yeah. American, and what I’m doing is trying to get to Mydworth.”

“Mydworth?” he said, as if he’d never heard of the place. “Mydworth?”

Just my luck, thought Kat. Meet some guy who’s never left the farm.

She waited, while he scrutinised her.

“I mean, is it far?” she asked. “If you could just point—”

“Far? No, it’s not *far*.” The man snorted, looked back at his dog as if checking that the sheepdog was paying attention to the conversation. “But yer goin’ the wrong way, that’s for sure.”

Not exactly the most helpful local she ever ran into, Kat thought.

But then he climbed down from the tractor, nodded to her to follow him and crossed the road to the other side. Kat looked at the dog, who had decided to go to sleep, and followed the farmer.

He stopped at the edge of the road, then pointed across the field of wheat into a valley that lay just half a mile away.

“See that there?” he said. “That’s Mydworth.”

Kat followed his arm and looked down into the valley. There, nestled in a fold of hills, what looked the quintessential English town.

Something out of a picture book.

“You could walk it in five minutes,” he said, “if you didn’t have a car to get in the way, like.”

She took in the town: a sprawl of houses and roads. A couple of church steeples. Then what looked like some grand houses in the meadows beyond. A river curving lazily down the valley.

A station, maybe half a mile from the centre – and even now, a train pulling away, steam and smoke puffing as it headed for the hills.

So that’s Mydworth, she thought.

My new home.

And suddenly she didn’t mind at all that she had gotten lost.