

March 5, 1980

Dear Ken,

We're very pleased with the second draft of THE KEY TO REBECCA. It's even richer, sharper and more exciting than the first draft. This will be your biggest book yet.

There are, however, a few points where we'd like to suggest reworking:

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316 Sonja and Wolff have finally gotten their threesome together with Elene. A much-anticipated scene -- sexy and also suspenseful because you know that Wolff has a crucial midnight rendezvous with his radio which could literally cost the British all of Egypt. But Wolff never makes this call to Rommel presumably because he was so sexually satiated by his orgy partners that he fell asleep. This needs some clarification. How can a cool, calculating character like Wolff -- who up to now has been less interested in sex than in manipulation and only arranges the threesome to mollify Sonja -- be so forgetful? It doesn't seem in character. How about having Elene drop some kind of soporific in their pre-coitus drinks? She might have obtained such an herb or drug on the sly in her job at the food store in which she works -- from the Arab foods section perhaps. Also, Wolff should explode out of his sleep. This missed transmission to Rommel is major and I would expect him to leap out of the bed in a rage rather than note her absence and proceed to the bathroom (page 323). A strong Wolff reaction would be most helpful. As is, his eventual response to Kemel is: "I'll be sending a message tomorrow night - tonight, I mean, damn, I've hardly slept." And this is after Wolff has obtained his most important information yet. Information which would bring him glory. N

Another aspect of the houseboat scenes that needs clarification or reworking for us is the fact that Vandam entrusts Kemel with the crucially important task of watching the boat for Wolff's arrival. Wolff is Vandam's nemesis. He holds the key to the success or failure of Rommel's North African strategy. The fate of the British in Egypt hinges on Vandam finding this German spy. And as is pointed out throughout the novel the British did not have great faith in the Egyptian allegiances nor their sleuthing abilities. Relations between the two were shaky at best. As is, it is not credible that Vandam would either personally or professionally trust Kemel with such an all-important task.

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- 357 Wolff has escaped. Vandam has lost Elene. Time is running out for the British. Rommel is at the gates of the city. The last thing I'd expect Vandam to do at this dramatic tense moment is to go home and take a nap -- "I think I'll go home and take a nap." Granted he has to go home to find the Atlas with Elene's bloody clue. But maybe a more viable reason could be because he has a premonition that connects Billy with Wolff's whereabouts. Somehow he should go home for another reason.
- 274 Vandam says, "Suppose I capture Wolff. Suppose I get his radio. Suppose I find the key to his code." Capturing Wolff has been his plan all along. It was the impersonating of Wolff on the radio that was his recent brainstorm. Could this be reworked a little?

General Comments:

We have trouble with the interior monologues which just don't seem to work for us. Are they necessary? Especially at the end, beginning page 363. Wolff's is the weakest of all. Earlier in the novel is Vandam's ruminating on what would happen if the Nazis took over Egypt. Billy would be in a Nazi school, etc. This, too sounds a little strained, overdrawn, and questionable as well. If the Nazis moved into Cairo one assumes foreigners and their dependents such as Billy would be well on their way out of the place. No.

Wolff's status as a German spy needs enhancing. How important is he to the Germans? It seems almost accidental that Rommel picks up his first transmission. It would make him an even more memorable villain if the Germans overtly invest him with the spy status he so richly deserves. No

Rommel is such a fascinating historical figure. Somehow he needs a little more delineation here. There's not enough emotional punch in his characterization. And the war strategy stuff gets quite confusing at times. Likewise Sadat who's in briefly then doesn't reappear until the very end of the novel. Can he also be more developed as a character? No.

We think that Elena sounds and reads better than Elene (and we tend to read it as Elena anyway). OK

And finally, we loved the foreword you included with the proposal: "In the first six months of 1942 a German-Italian army commanded by Erwin Rommel came within a hairsbreadth of conquering North Africa, etc." Could you reinstate it? It immediately sets the scene and the historical context for what follows. No.

We think you've done a fantastic job. You've got another winner here.

By the way, we just had a sales meeting for October 1980 and I can't begin to tell you how enthusiastic the whole company is about TRIPLE. First of all every single solitary person (and I don't just mean the key people, I do mean everyone) has read it and loves it. Second, the feeling is that TRIPLE will be the #1

smash best seller for the fall. It is really so wonderful to have such excitement -- for a book, for an author, for what's been in the past (NEEDLE) and what's coming up (REBECCA -- all "they" know is that I adore it and they're in for one big treat when it's published). 1980 and 1981 are really going to be Ken Follett years.

Best as ever,

  
Diana Levine

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