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A Special Relationship

Douglas Kennedy

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About the Author

Douglas Kennedy's eight previous novels include the critically acclaimed bestsellers *The Big Picture, The Pursuit of Happiness, State of the Union* and *The Woman in the Fifth.* He is also the author of three highly praised travel books. His work has been translated into twenty-two languages. In 2006 he was awarded the French decoration of Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Born in Manhattan in 1955, he has two children and currently divides his time between London, Paris and Maine.

Praise for A Special Relationship

‘A compelling emotional rollercoaster of a novel’
Woman & Home

‘With this book Kennedy certainly triumphs; he has created an engaging and rattling good read’ *Sunday Independent*

‘A gripping novel of love, destiny and lives falling apart’
Mail on Sunday

‘Kennedy has created a complex heroine in Sally . . . utterly believable . . . undeniably gripping’ *Time Out*

‘This is the second time Kennedy has performed the reverse Houdini act of sliding into a woman’s mind. It’s a neat trick that hardly ever falters’ *Marie Claire*

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another one for Max and Amelia
another one for Grace

In my enormous city it is – night,
as from my sleeping house I go – out,
and people think perhaps I’m a daughter or a wife
but in my mind is one thought only: night.

– Elaine Feinstein, *Insomnia*

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Any errors of legal or medical fact are my own.

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This novel was started in one of the Leighton Studios of the Banff Centre for the Arts, amidst the epic grandeur that is the Canadian Rockies. It is the best writing hideout imaginable.

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Finally, twenty years after we first met, I would like to thank Grace Carley for still being Grace Carley.

One

ABOUT AN HOUR after I met Tony Hobbs, he saved my life.

I know that sounds just a little melodramatic, but it's the truth. Or, at least, as true as anything a journalist will tell you.

I was in Somalia – a country I had never visited until I got a call in Cairo and suddenly found myself dispatched there. It was a Friday afternoon – the Muslim Holy Day. Like most foreign correspondents in the Egyptian capital, I was using the official day of rest to do just that. I was sunning myself beside the pool of the Gezira Club – the former haunt of British officers during the reign of King Farouk, but now the domain of the Cairene beau monde and assorted foreigners who'd been posted to the Egyptian capital. Even though the sun is a constant commodity in Egypt, it is something that most correspondents based there rarely get to see. Especially if, like me, they are bargain basement one-person operations, covering the entire Middle East and all of eastern Africa. Which is why I got that call on that Friday afternoon.

'Is this Sally Goodchild?' asked an American voice I hadn't heard before.

'That's right,' I said, sitting upright and holding the cell phone tightly to my ear in an attempt to block out a quartet of babbling Egyptian matrons sitting beside me. 'Who's this?'

'Dick Leonard from the paper.'

I stood up, grabbing a pad and a pen from my bag. Then I walked to a quiet corner of the veranda. 'The paper' was my employer. Also known as the *Boston Post*. And if they were calling me on my cell phone, something was definitely up.

'I'm new on the Foreign Desk,' Leonard said, 'and deputizing today for Charlie Geiken. I'm sure you've heard

about the flood in Somalia?'

Rule one of journalism: never admit you've been even five minutes out of contact with the world at large. So all I said was, 'How many dead?'

'No definitive body count so far, according to CNN. And from all reports, it's making the '97 deluge look like a drizzle.'

'Where exactly in Somalia?'

'The Juba River Valley. At least four villages have been submerged. The editor wants somebody there. Can you leave straight away?'

So that's how I found myself on a flight to Mogadishu, just four hours after receiving the call from Boston. Getting there meant dealing with the eccentricities of Ethiopian Airlines, and changing planes in Addis Ababa, before landing in Mogadishu just after midnight. I stepped out into the humid African night, and tried to find a cab into town. Eventually, a taxi showed up, but the driver drove like a kamikaze pilot, and also took a back road into the city centre – a road that was unpaved and also largely deserted. When I asked him why he had chosen to take us off the beaten track, he just laughed. So I pulled out my cell phone and dialled some numbers, and told the desk clerk at the Central Hotel in Mogadishu that he should call the police immediately and inform them that I was being kidnapped by a taxi driver, car licence number . . . (and, yes, I did note the cab's licence plate before getting into it). Immediately the driver turned all apologetic, veering back to the main road, imploring me not to get him into trouble, and saying, 'Really, it was just a short cut.'

'In the middle of the night, when there's no traffic? You really expect me to believe that?'

'Will the police be waiting for me at the hotel?'

'If you get me there, I'll call them off.'

He veered back to the main road, and I made it intact to the Central Hotel in Mogadishu – the cab driver still

apologizing as I left his car. After four hours' sleep, I managed to make contact with the International Red Cross in Somalia, and talked my way on to one of their helicopters that was heading to the flood zone.

It was just after nine in the morning when the chopper took off from a military airfield outside the city. There were no seats inside. I sat with three other Red Cross staffers on its cold steel floor. The helicopter was elderly and deafening. As it left the ground, it lurched dangerously to the starboard side – and we were all thrown against the thick webbed belts, bolted to the cabin walls, into which we had fastened ourselves before take-off. Once the pilot regained control and we evened out, the guy seated on the floor opposite me smiled broadly and said, 'Well, that was a good start.'

Though it was difficult to hear anything over the din of the rotor blades, I did discern that the fellow had an English accent. Then I looked at him more closely and figured that this was no aid worker. It wasn't just the sang-froid when it looked like we might just crash. It wasn't just his blue denim shirt, his blue denim jeans, and his stylish horn-rimmed sunglasses. Nor was it his tanned face – which, coupled with his still-blond hair, leant him a certain weather-beaten appeal if you liked that perpetually insomniac look. No – what really convinced me that he wasn't Red Cross was the jaded, slightly flirtatious smile he gave me after our near-death experience. At that moment, I knew that he was a journalist.

Just as I saw that he was looking me over, appraising me, and also probably working out that I too wasn't relief worker material. Of course, I was wondering how I was being perceived. I have one of those Emily Dickinson-style New England faces – angular, a little gaunt, with a permanently fair complexion that resists extended contact with the sun. A man who once wanted to marry me – and turn me into exactly the sort of soccer mom I was determined never to become – told me I was 'beautiful in an interesting sort of

way’. After I stopped laughing, this struck me as something out of the ‘plucky’ school of backhanded compliments. He also told me that he admired the way I looked after myself. At least he didn’t say I was ‘wearing well’. Still, it is true that my ‘interesting’ face hasn’t much in the way of wrinkles or age-lines, and my light brown hair (cut sensibly short) isn’t yet streaked with grey. So though I may be crowding middle age, I can pass myself off as just over the thirty-year-old frontier.

All these banal thoughts were abruptly interrupted when the helicopter suddenly rolled to the left as the pilot went full throttle and we shot off at speed to a higher altitude. Accompanying this abrupt, convulsive ascent – the G-force of which threw us all against our webbed straps – was the distinctive sound of anti-aircraft fire. Immediately, the Brit was digging into his daypack, pulling out a pair of field glasses. Despite the protestations of one of the Red Cross workers, he unbuckled his straps and manoeuvred himself around to peer out one of the porthole windows.

‘Looks like someone’s trying to kill us,’ he shouted over the din of the engine. But his voice was calm, if not redolent of amusement.

‘Who’s “someone”?’ I shouted back.

‘Usual militia bastards,’ he said, his eyes still fastened to the field glasses. ‘The same charmers who caused such havoc during the last flood.’

‘But why are they shooting at a Red Cross chopper?’ I asked.

‘Because they can,’ he said. ‘They shoot at anything foreign and moving. It’s sport to them.’

He turned to the trio of Red Cross medicos strapped in next to me.

‘I presume your chap in the cockpit knows what he’s doing,’ he asked. None of them answered him – because they were all white with shock. That’s when he flashed me a

deeply mischievous smile, making me think: the guy's actually enjoying all this.

I smiled back. That was a point of pride with me – to never show fear under fire. I knew from experience that, in such situations, all you could do was take a very deep breath, remain focused, and hope you got through it. And so I picked a spot on the floor of the cabin and stared at it, all the while silently telling myself: *It will be fine. It will be just* . . .

And then the chopper did another roll and the Brit was tossed away from the window, but managed to latch on to his nearby straps and avoid being hurled across the cabin.

'You okay?' I asked.

Another of his smiles. 'I am now,' he said.

A further three stomach-churning rolls to the right, followed by one more rapid acceleration, and we seemed to leave the danger zone. Ten nervous minutes followed, then we banked low. I craned my neck, looked out the window and sucked in my breath. There before me was a submerged landscape – Noah's Flood. The water had consumed everything. Houses and livestock floated by. Then I spied the first dead body – face down in the water, followed by four more bodies, two of which were so small that, even from the air, I was certain they were children.

Everyone in the chopper was now peering out the window, taking in the extent of the calamity. The chopper banked again, pulling away from the nucleus and coming in fast over higher ground. Up in the distance, I could see a cluster of jeeps and military vehicles. Closer inspection showed that we were trying to land amidst the chaos of a Somalian Army encampment, with several dozen soldiers milling around the clapped-out military equipment spread across the field. In the near-distance, we could see three white jeeps flying the Red Cross flag. There were around fourteen aid workers standing by the jeeps, frantically waving to us. There was a problem, however. A cluster of Somalian soldiers was

positioned within a hundred yards of the Red Cross team – and they were simultaneously making beckoning gestures towards us with their arms.

‘This should be amusing,’ the Brit said.

‘Not if it’s like last time,’ one of the Red Cross team said.

‘What happened last time?’ I asked.

‘They tried to loot us,’ he said.

‘That happened a lot back in ’97 too,’ the Brit said.

‘You were here in ’97?’ I asked him.

‘Oh yes,’ he said, flashing me another smile. ‘A delightful spot, Somalia. Especially under water.’

We overflew the soldiers and the Red Cross jeeps. But the aid workers on the ground seemed to know the game we were playing, as they jumped into the jeeps, reversed direction, and started racing towards the empty terrain where we were coming down. I glanced over at the Brit. He had his binoculars pressed against the window, that sardonic smile of his growing broader by the nanosecond.

‘Looks like there’s going to be a little race to meet us,’ he said.

I peered out my window and saw a dozen Somalian soldiers running in our general direction.

‘See what you mean,’ I shouted back to him as we landed with a bump.

With terra firma beneath us, the Red Cross man next to me was on his feet, yanking up the lever which kept the cabin door in its place. The others headed toward the cargo bay at the rear of the cabin, undoing the webbing that held in the crates of medical supplies and dried food.

‘Need a hand?’ the Brit asked one of the Red Cross guys.

‘We’ll be fine,’ he said. ‘But you better get moving before the Army shows up.’

‘Where’s the nearest village?’

‘It *was* about a kilometre due south of here. But it’s not there anymore.’

‘Right,’ he said. Then he turned to me and asked, ‘You coming?’

I nodded, but then turned back to the Red Cross man and asked, ‘What are you going to do about the soldiers?’

‘What we usually do. Stall them while the pilot radios the Somalian central command – if you can call it that – and orders some officer over here to get them off our backs. But you both better get out of here now. The soldiers really don’t see the point of journalists.’

‘We’re gone,’ I said. ‘Thanks for the lift.’

The Brit and I headed out of the cabin. As soon as we hit the ground, he tapped me on the shoulder and pointed towards the three Red Cross jeeps. Crouching low, we ran in their direction, not looking back until we were behind them. This turned out to be a strategically smart move, as we had managed to dodge the attention of the Somalian soldiers, who had now surrounded the chopper. Four of them had their guns trained on the Red Cross team. One of the soldiers started shouting at the aid workers – but they didn’t seem flustered at all, and began the ‘stalling for time’ gambit. Though I couldn’t hear much over the din of the rotor motor, it was clear that the Red Cross guys had played this dangerous game before, and knew exactly what to do. The Brit nudged me with his elbow.

‘See that clump of trees over there,’ he said, pointing towards a small patch of gum trees around fifty yards from us.

I nodded. After one fast final glance at the soldiers – now ripping into a case of medical supplies – we made a dash for it. It couldn’t have taken more than twenty seconds to cover the fifty yards, but God did it seem long. I knew that, if the soldiers saw two figures running for cover, their natural reaction would be to shoot us down. When we reached the woods, we ducked behind a tree. Neither of us was winded – but when I looked at the Brit, I caught the briefest flicker of

adrenalin-fuelled tension in his eyes. Once he realized that I'd glimpsed it, he immediately turned on his sardonic smile.

'Well done,' he whispered. 'Think you can make it over there without getting shot?'

I looked in the direction he was pointing – another meagre grove of trees that fronted the now-deluged river. I met his challenging smile. 'I never get shot,' I said. Then we ran out of the trees, making a manic beeline for the next patch of cover. This run took around a minute – during which time the world went silent, and all I could hear were my feet scything through the high grass. I was genuinely tense. But like that moment in the helicopter when we first came under fire, I tried to concentrate on something abstract like my breathing. The Brit was ahead of me. But as soon as he reached the trees, something brought him to a sudden halt. I stopped in my tracks as I saw him walking backwards, his arms held high in the air. Emerging from the trees was a young Somalian soldier. He couldn't have been more than fifteen. His rifle was trained on the Brit, who was quietly attempting to talk his way out of this situation. Suddenly the soldier saw me – and when he turned his gun on me, I made a desperate error of judgment. Instead of immediately acting submissive – coming to a complete halt, putting my hands above my head, and making no sudden movements (as I had been trained to do) – I hit the ground, certain he was going to fire at me. This caused him to roar at me, as he now tried to get me in his sights. Then, suddenly, the Brit tackled him, knocking him to the ground. I was now back on my feet, running towards the scene. The Brit swung a clenched fist, slamming it into the soldier's stomach, knocking the wind out of him. The kid groaned, and the Brit brought his boot down hard on the hand that was clutching the gun. The kid screamed.

'Let go of the gun,' the Brit demanded.

'Fuck you,' the kid yelled. So the Brit brought his boot down even harder. This time the soldier released the

weapon, which the Brit quickly scooped up and had trained on the soldier in a matter of seconds.

‘I hate impoliteness,’ the Brit said, cocking the rifle.

The kid now began to sob, curling up into a foetal position, pleading for his life. I turned to the Brit and said, ‘You can’t . . .’

But he just looked at me and winked. Then, turning back to the child soldier, he said, ‘Did you hear my friend? She doesn’t want me to shoot you.’

The kid said nothing. He just curled himself tighter into a ball, crying like the frightened child he was.

‘I think you should apologize to her, don’t you?’ said the Brit. I could see the gun trembling in his hands.

‘Sorry, sorry, sorry,’ the kid said, the words choked with sobs. The Brit looked at me.

‘Apology accepted?’ he asked. I nodded.

The Brit nodded at me, then turned back to the kid and asked, ‘How’s your hand?’

‘Hurts.’

‘Sorry about that,’ he said. ‘You can go now, if you like.’

The kid, still trembling, got to his feet. His face was streaked with tears and there was a damp patch around his crotch where he’d wet himself out of fear. He looked at us with terror in his eyes – still certain he was going to be shot. To his credit, the Brit reached out and put a steadying hand on the soldier’s shoulder.

‘It’s all right,’ he said quietly. ‘Nothing’s going to happen to you. But you have to promise me one thing: you must not tell anyone in your company that you met us. Will you do that?’

The soldier glanced at the gun still in the Brit’s hands and nodded. Many times.

‘Good. One final question. Are there any army patrols down river from here?’

‘No. Our base got washed away. I got separated from the others.’

‘How about the village near here?’

‘Nothing left of it.’

‘All the people washed away?’

‘Some made it to a hill.’

‘Where’s the hill?’

The soldier pointed toward an overgrown path through the trees.

‘How long from here on foot?’ he asked.

‘Half an hour.’

The Brit looked at me and said, ‘That’s our story.’

‘Sounds good to me,’ I said, meeting his look.

‘Run along now,’ the Brit said to the soldier.

‘My gun . . .’

‘Sorry, but I’m keeping it.’

‘I’ll get in big trouble without it.’

‘Say it was washed away in the flood. And remember: I expect you to keep that promise you made. You never saw us. Understood?’

The kid looked back at the gun, then up again at the Brit.

‘I promise.’

‘Good lad. Now go.’

The boy soldier nodded and dashed out of the trees in the general direction of the chopper. When he was out of sight, the Brit shut his eyes, drew in a deep breath and said, ‘Fucking hell.’

‘And so say all of us.’

He opened his eyes and looked at me. ‘You all right?’ he said.

‘Yeah – but I feel like a complete jerk.’

He grinned. ‘You *were* a complete jerk – but it happens. Especially when you get surprised by a kid with a gun. On which note . . .’

He motioned with his thumb that we should make tracks. Which is exactly what we did – negotiating our way through the thicket of woods, finding the overgrown path, threading our way on to the edge of swamped fields. We walked non-

stop for fifteen minutes, saying nothing. The Brit led the way. I walked a few steps behind. I watched my companion as we hiked deeper into this submerged terrain. He was very focused on the task of getting us as far away from the soldiers as possible. He was also acutely conscious of any irregular sounds emanating from this open terrain. Twice he stopped and turned back to me, putting his finger to his lips when he thought he heard something. We only started to walk again when he was certain no one was on our tail. I was intrigued by the way he held the soldier's gun. Instead of slinging it over his shoulder, he carried it in his right hand, the barrel pointed downwards, the rifle held away from his body. And I knew that he would never have shot that soldier. Because he was so obviously uncomfortable holding a gun.

After around fifteen minutes, he pointed to a couple of large rocks positioned near the river. We sat down, but didn't say anything for a moment as we continued to gauge the silence, trying to discern approaching footsteps in the distance. After a moment, he spoke.

'The way I figure it, if that kid had told on us, his comrades would be here by now.'

'You certainly scared him into thinking you would kill him.'

'He needed scaring. Because he would have shot you without compunction.'

'I know. Thank you.'

'All part of the service.' Then he proffered his hand and said, 'Tony Hobbs. Who do you write for?'

'The *Boston Post*.'

An amused smile crossed his lips. 'Do you really?'

'Yes,' I said. '*Really*. We do have foreign correspondents, you know.'

'*Really?*' he said, mimicking my accent. 'So you're a *foreign correspondent*?'

'*Really*,' I said, attempting to mimic his accent.

To his credit, he laughed. And said, 'I deserved that.'

‘Yes. You did.’

‘So where do you *correspond* from?’ he asked.

‘Cairo. And let me guess. You write for the *Sun*?’

‘The *Chronicle,* actually.’

I tried not to appear impressed. ‘The *Chronicle* actually, *actually*?’ I said.

‘You give as good as you get.’

‘It comes with being the correspondent of a smallish newspaper. You have to hold your own with arrogant big boys.’

‘Oh, you’ve already decided I’m arrogant?’

‘I worked that out two minutes after first seeing you in the chopper. You based in London?’

‘Cairo, actually.’

‘But I know the *Chronicle* guy there. Henry . . .’

‘Bartlett. Got sick. Ulcer thing. So they sent for me from Tokyo around ten days ago.’

‘I used to cover Tokyo. Four years ago.’

‘Well, I’m obviously following you around.’

There was a sound of nearby footsteps. We both tensed. Tony picked up the rifle he had leaned against the rock. Then we heard the steps grow nearer. As we stood up, a young Somalian woman came running down the path, a child in her arms. The woman couldn’t have been more than twenty; the baby was no more than two months old. The mother was gaunt; the child chillingly still. As soon as the woman saw us, she began to scream in a dialect that neither of us understood, making wild gesticulations at the gun in Tony’s hand. Tony twigged immediately. He tossed the gun into the rushing waters of the river – adding it to the flooded debris washing downstream. The gesture seemed to surprise the woman. But as she turned back to me and started pleading with me again, her legs buckled. Tony and I both grabbed her, keeping her upright. I glanced down at her lifeless baby, still held tightly in her arms. I looked up at the Brit. He nodded in the direction of the Red Cross

chopper. We each put an arm around her emaciated waist, and began the slow journey back to the clearing where we'd landed earlier.

When we reached it, I was relieved to see that several Somalian Army jeeps had rolled up near the chopper, and the previously marauding troops had been brought under control. We escorted her past the soldiers, and made a beeline for the Red Cross chopper. Two of the aid workers from the flight were still unloading supplies.

'Who's the doctor around here?' I asked. One of the guys looked up, saw the woman and child, and sprang into action, while his colleague politely told us to get lost.

'There's nothing more you can do now.'

Nor, it turned out, was there any chance that we'd be allowed back down the path towards that washed-out village – as the Somalian Army had now blocked it off. When I found the head Red Cross medico and told him about the villagers perched on a hill around two kilometres from here, he said (in his crispest Swiss accent), 'We know all about it. And we will be sending our helicopter as soon as the Army gives us clearance.'

'Let us go with you,' I said.

'It's not possible. The Army will only allow three of our team to fly with them—'

'Tell them we're part of the team,' Tony said.

'We need to send medical men.'

'Send two,' Tony said, 'and let one of us—'

But we were interrupted by the arrival of some Army officer. He tapped Tony on the shoulder.

'You – papers.'

Then he tapped me. 'You too.'

We handed over our respective passports. 'Red Cross papers,' he demanded. When Tony started to make up some far-fetched story about leaving them behind, the officer rolled his eyes and said one damning word, 'Journalists.'

Then he turned to his soldiers and said, ‘Get them on the next chopper back to Mogadishu.’

We returned to the capital under virtual armed guard. When we landed at another military field on the outskirts of the capital, I fully expected us to be taken into custody and arrested. But instead, one of the soldiers on the plane asked me if I had any American dollars.

‘Perhaps,’ I said – and then, chancing my arm, asked him if he could arrange a ride for us to the Central Hotel for ten bucks.

‘You pay twenty, you get your ride.’

He even commandeered a jeep to get us there. En route, Tony and I spoke for the first time since being placed under armed guard.

‘Not a lot to write about, is there?’ I said.

‘I’m sure we’ll both manage to squeeze something out of it.’

We found two rooms on the same floor, and agreed to meet after we’d filed our respective copy. Around two hours later – shortly after I’d dispatched by email seven hundred words on the general disarray in the Juba River Valley, the sight of floating bodies in the river, the infrastructural chaos, and the experience of being fired upon in a Red Cross helicopter by rebel forces – there was a knock at my door.

Tony stood outside, holding a bottle of Scotch and two glasses.

‘This looks promising,’ I said. ‘Come on in.’

He didn’t leave again until seven the next morning – when we checked out to catch the early morning flight back to Cairo. From the moment I saw him in the chopper, I knew that we would inevitably fall into bed with each other, should the opportunity arise. Because that’s how this game worked. Foreign correspondents rarely had spouses or ‘significant others’ – and most people you met in the field were definitely not the sort you wanted to share a bed with for ten minutes, let alone a night.

But when I woke next to Tony, the thought struck me: *he's actually living where I live*. Which led to what was, for me, a most unusual thought: *and I'd actually like to see him again. In fact, I'd like to see him tonight.*

Two

I'VE NEVER CONSIDERED myself the sentimental type. On the contrary, I've always recognized in myself a certain cut-and-run attitude when it comes to romance – something my one and only fiancé told me around seven years ago, when I broke it off with him. His name was Richard Pettiford. He was a Boston lawyer – smart, erudite, driven. And I really did like him. The problem was, I also liked my work.

'You're always running away,' he said after I told him that I was becoming the *Post*'s correspondent in Tokyo.

'This is a big professional move,' I said.

'You said that when you went to Washington.'

'That was just a six month secondment – and I saw you every weekend.'

'But it was still running away.'

'It was a great opportunity. Like going to Tokyo.'

'But I'm a great opportunity.'

'You're right,' I said. 'You are. But so am I. So come to Tokyo with me.'

'But I won't make partner if I do that,' he said.

'And if I stay, I won't make a very good partner's wife.'

'If you really loved me, you'd stay.'

I laughed. And said, 'Then I guess I don't love you.'

Which pretty much ended our two-year liaison there and then – because when you make an admission like that, there's very little comeback. Though I was truly saddened that we couldn't 'make a go of it' (to borrow an expression that Richard used just a little too often), I also knew that I couldn't play the suburban role he was offering. Anyway, had I accepted such a part, my passport would now only contain a few holiday stamps from Bermuda and other resort spots, rather than the twenty crammed pages of visas I'd managed to obtain over the years. And I certainly

wouldn’t have ended up sitting on a flight from Addis Ababa to Cairo, getting pleasantly tipsy with a wholly charming, wholly cynical Brit, with whom I’d just spent the night . . .

‘So you’ve really never been married?’ Tony asked me as the seatbelt signs were switched off.

‘Don’t sound so surprised,’ I said. ‘I don’t swoon easily.’

‘I’ll keep that in mind,’ he said.

‘Foreign correspondents aren’t the marrying kind.’

‘Really? I hadn’t noticed.’

I laughed, then asked, ‘And you?’

‘You must be joking.’

‘Never came close?’

‘Everyone’s come close once. Just like you.’

‘How do you know I’ve come close?’ I said.

‘Because everyone’s come close once.’

‘Didn’t you just say that?’

‘Touché. And let me guess – you didn’t marry the guy because you’d just been offered your first overseas posting . . .’

‘My, my – you are perceptive,’ I said.

‘Hardly,’ he said. ‘It’s just how it always works.’

Naturally, he was right. And he was clever enough not to ask me too much about the fellow in question, or any other aspects of my so-called romantic history, or even where I grew up. If anything, the very fact that he didn’t press the issue (other than to ascertain that I too had successfully dodged marriage) impressed me. Because it meant that – unlike most other foreign correspondents I had met – he wasn’t treating me like some girlie who had been transferred from the Style Section to the front line. Nor did he try to impress me with his big city credentials – and the fact that the *Chronicle* of London carried more international clout than the *Boston Post.* If anything, he spoke to me as a professional equal. He wanted to hear about the contacts I’d made in Cairo (as he was new there), and to trade stories about covering Japan. Best of all, he wanted to make me

laugh . . . which he did with tremendous ease. As I was quickly discovering, Tony Hobbs wasn't just a great talker; he was also a terrific storyteller.

We talked non-stop all the way back to Cairo. Truth be told, we hadn't stopped talking since we woke up together that morning. There was an immediate ease between us – not just because we had so much professional terrain in common, but also because we seemed to possess a similar worldview: slightly jaded, fiercely independent, with a passionate undercurrent about the business we were both in. We also both acknowledged that foreign corresponding was a kid's game, in which most practitioners were considered way over the hill by the time they reached fifty.

'Which makes me eight years away from the slag heap,' Tony said somewhere over Sudan.

'You're that young?' I said. 'I really thought you were at least ten years older.'

He shot me a cool, amused look. And said, 'You're fast.'

'I try.'

'Oh, you do very well . . . for a provincial reporter.'

'Two points,' I said, nudging him with my elbow.

'Keeping score, are we?'

'Oh, yes.'

I could tell that he was completely comfortable with this sort of banter. He enjoyed repartee – not just for its verbal gamesmanship, but also because it allowed him to retreat from the serious, or anything that might be self-revealing. Every time our in-flight conversation veered toward the personal, he'd quickly switch into badinage mode. This didn't disconcert me. After all, we'd just met and were still sizing each other up. But I still noted this diversionary tactic, and wondered if it would hinder me from getting to know the guy – as, much to my surprise, Tony Hobbs was the first man I'd met in about four years whom I wanted to get to know.

Not that I was going to reveal that fact to him. Because (a) that might put him off, and (b) I never chased anyone. So, when we arrived in Cairo, we shared a cab back to Zamalek (the relatively upscale expatriate quarter where just about every foreign correspondent and international business type lived). As it turned out, Tony's place was only two blocks from mine. But he insisted on dropping me off first. As the taxi slowed to a halt in front of my door, he reached into his pocket and handed me his card.

'Here's where to find me,' he said.

I pulled out a business card of my own, and scribbled a number on the back of it.

'And here's my home number.'

'Thanks,' he said, taking it. 'So call me, eh?'

'No, you make the first move,' I said.

'Old fashioned, are we?' he said, raising his eyebrows.

'Hardly. But I don't make the first move. All right?'

He leaned over and gave me a very long kiss.

'Fine,' he said, then added, 'That was fun.'

'Yes. It was.'

An awkward pause. I gathered up my things.

'See you, I guess,' I said.

'Yes,' he said with a smile. 'See you.'

As soon as I was upstairs in my empty, silent apartment, I kicked myself for playing the tough dame. '*No, you make the first move*.' What a profoundly dumb thing to say. Because I knew that guys like Tony Hobbs didn't cross my path every day.

Still, I could now do nothing but put the entire business out of my mind. So I spent the better part of an hour soaking in a bath, then crawled into bed and passed out for nearly ten hours – having hardly slept for the past two nights. I was up just after seven in the morning. I made breakfast. I powered up my laptop. I turned out my weekly 'Letter from Cairo', in which I recounted my dizzying flight in