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THE  
CAIRO  
AFFAIR



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# THE CAIRO AFFAIR

Olen Steinhauer



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*For JN & EP, whose friendship helps keep us sane*

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Thanks to Mark Milstein, who was there, for revisiting his memories of the road from Novi Sad to Vukovar for me.

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# Contents

Title Page

Copyright Notice

Dedication

Acknowledgments

Collection Strategies

Part I: A Disloyal Wife

Sophie

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Part II: We Should Look at Ourselves

Stan

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

John

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

---

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Stan

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

John

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

### Part III: What the Rest of the World Looks Like

Sophie

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Omar

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Sophie

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

---

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Omar

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Part IV: The New Year

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Author Interview

Preview: *All the Old Knives*

Also by Olen Steinhauer

Praise for *The Cairo Affair*

About the Author

Copyright



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# COLLECTION STRATEGIES

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On February 19, 2011, two days after the Day of Revolt, the first kidnapping occurred in London, and over the following seventy-two hours similar scenes occurred in Brussels, Paris, and New York. In only three days, five politically active Libyan exiles vanished from the face of the earth: Yousef al-Juwali, Abdurrahim Zargoun, Waled Belhadj, Abdel Jalil, and Mohammed el-Keib.

Word of these abductions reached Langley along the usual paths—updates from the cousin intercepted e-mails, news feeds, and worried reports from friends and colleagues—yet the computer algorithms somehow missed the possibility that they were part of a single event. It took a researcher in the Office of Collection Strategies and Analysis, Jibril Aziz, to see the connection. As a native Libyan who had been reared on the anxieties of his family’s political exile, he was primed to find connections where others wouldn’t be looking, and his enthusiasm sometimes meant that he found connections where they didn’t actually exist.

Jibril worked in the Original Headquarters Building in an office the size of three, for in 1991 a contractor had altered the penitentiary-like 1950s design by bringing down two walls, finally connecting all the members of the North Africa section of Collection Strategies. Jibril was one of fifteen analysts in that long room, each half-hidden behind cubicle walls, and occasionally they coalesced at one end to puzzle over the decade-old coffeemaker and joke about their view, which was largely obscured by sculpted rhododendron bushes, though if they stood on tiptoe they could catch a sight of the busy parking lot. At thirty-three, Jibril was the youngest analyst in Collection Strategies.

Before coming across the disappearances on Tuesday, February 22, Jibril had spent his lunch break eating a meal packed by his wife, Inaya, and verifying the translation of a just-broadcast speech by Muammar Gadhafi, who had rambled for more than an hour in a diatribe against “rats and agents” and “rats and cats” and “those rats who’ve taken the tablets.”

*If they’re not following Gadhafi, who would they follow? Somebody with a beard? Impossible. The people are with us, supporting us, these are our people. I’ve brought them up. Everywhere they are shouting slogans in support of Muammar Gadhafi.*

After this depressing chore, he tried to divert himself with the Libya-related reports that had come in over the transom, searching for something—anything—to buoy his spirits. This was how he came across the disappearances, and when he read of them he felt as if a light had been turned on. Finally something palpably real after the fantasy mutterings of a dictator. He was excited in the aesthetic way that all researchers are when they’ve discovered connections where previously nothing existed.

Yet there was more: There was Stumbler.

To reach his direct supervisor, Jibril had to walk down the corridor, steeling himself against the sharp aroma of disinfectant, and climb a set of noisy stairs, then wait in Jake Copeland’s anteroom

often chatting with researchers from the Europe and South America sections as they all waited for word with the boss. Because of the state of the world, the Asia section had recently begun reporting directly to Copeland's superior, so, beyond the weekly reports and bi-weekly meetings that brought the whole world together, no one really knew what was happening in that part of the globe.

"They're doing it," Jibril said once he'd gained access. He spread five pages across Copeland's desk, each with a photo, ten lines of bio, and the circumstances of the man's disappearance.

"It?"

"Stumbler, Jake. It's *on*."

"Slow down. Take a breath."

Jibril finally took a chair, leaned forward, and used a long brown finger to point at each of the faces. "One, two, three, four, five. All gone, just as the plan says. That's step one, by the book."

Copeland frowned, rubbing an eye with the heel of his hand.

"Check your in-box," Jibril commanded. "I sent you the memo."

Copeland pulled up his e-mail. He scrolled through Jibril's report. "Wordy, isn't it?"

"I'll wait."

Copeland sighed and began to read.

22 February 2011

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Unexpected Developments in Exile Behavior, Libyan

LONDON:

On the afternoon of 19 February, after a lunch with other members of the Association of the Democratic Libyan Front (ADLF) at Momo (Heddon Street), Yousef al-Juwali took the Picadilly Line south, presumably toward his home in Clapham. According to intelligence shared by MI-5, cameras recorded that al-Juwali was approached on the train by a man in a heavy padded coat, appx 6 feet tall. Arabic features, nationality undetermined. After a brief conversation, both men disembarked at Waterloo Station and proceeded on foot to York Road, where a black Ford Explorer pulled up. Aboveground cameras noted al-Juwali's hesitation—the Explorer, it is assumed, was unexpected—but after another moment's conversation both men got into the car. Yousef al-Juwali has not been heard from since. Inquiries showed that the Explorer had been stolen the previous evening. It was recovered two days later in South Croydon, abandoned and wiped clean.

BRUSSELS:

In a similar scene, Abdurrahim Zargoun of Libyans United (LU) boarded a bus in Place du Petit Sablon with a smaller, dark-skinned man on 20 February. Zargoun, too, is now missing.

PARIS:

Waled Belhadj, an ex-founding member of the ADLF who was rumored to be building an as-yet-unnamed exile network, simply vanished on 20 February. There is no record of the circumstances leading to his disappearance.

MANHATTAN:

Yesterday (21 February), two men—Abdel Jalil and Mohammed el-Keib of the Free Libya Organization (FLO)—were seen at

a wedding party on Long Island. Together, they returned by train to Manhattan, where they continued to el-Keib's apartment on the corner of Lexington and 89th. When they left an hour later they were in the company of a man whose size suggests he is the same one who approached Yousef al-Juwali in London. Appx 6 feet with North African features, dressed in an overcoat. Together, they took the subway north to the Bronx, then boarded the BX32 bus to Kingsbridge Heights. They presumably got off at one of four unobserved stops before the bus reached its terminus. They have been missing for sixteen hours.

#### ASSESSMENT:

To place these items in perspective, one should note that the uprising in Libya is at one of its (presumably) many peaks. Forty-eight hours before the first disappearance, in Benghazi, Libyans stepped into the streets for a "day of revolt" to voice contempt for Muammar Gadhafi's regime. The Libyan government's reaction has been to strike back in a violent crackdown. The Libyan exile community (of which I am a member) lives in a state of anxiety as the news trickles out of North Africa.

The men listed above comprise the backbone of the international anti-Gadhafi movement. Indeed, they are each named in the 2009 draft proposal for regime change composed by myself (AE/STUMBLER). If these five men are on the move, then something large is in the works.

Given the sparse evidence above, there are two possibilities:

a. Agreements. An under-the-table agreement has been reached between the various exile groups (FLO, ADLF, LU), and they are either mobilizing for a united public relations front or are preparing to enter Libya itself.

b. Agency Presence. While Stumbler was officially rejected in 2009, there remains the possibility that our own agency, or a section working independently, has decided that with the emergence of a viable active opposition within Libya the time is right to put the plan into action, beginning with the covert assembly of these primary exile figures.

Given the historic animosity between the groups mentioned above, "Agreements" is unlikely. While all three organizations share a desire for the end of Gadhafi's rule, their visions of a post-Gadhafi Libya keep them at odds, split apart by ideological rifts. Yet this would be the preferred scenario.

"Agency Presence," while potentially more likely, would be disastrous in this analyst's opinion. Stumbler began life in this office, but it was a product of a particular time, and with the emergence of an Arab Spring that time has passed. The practical objections brought up to the original plan remain, and now, with reports of Libyans dying in Benghazi in order to oust their dictator, any incursion by the United States (either by American soldiers or leaders handpicked by the U.S. from the exile population) would be rightly viewed as a hijacking of Libya's revolution, giving increased credibility to the Gadhafi regime and delegitimizing any pro-West government that would follow.

Jibril Aziz

OCSA

Jake Copeland leaned back, hoping to relieve a backache that had been troubling him for nearly a week. Backaches and hemorrhoids—that was how he described his job at parties when his friends asked with arched brows what life in intelligence was like. He'd sat at this desk for two years, riding in with the new administration, and had during that time watched many researchers run into his office with wild, unsubstantiated theories. Jibril was no more levelheaded than any of them, but he was smart and committed, and unlike most OCSA researchers he had Agency field experience. Yet as the child of a Libyan exile Jibril also had a personal stake in the region and sometimes couldn't see past his own emotions. And now this. "Stumbler, huh?"

"What have I been saying? They're putting Stumbler into motion."

“And when you say *they*—”

“I mean *we*. And it’s morally abhorrent.”

“It was your plan, Jibril.”

“And two years ago it would have been the right thing to do. Not now. Not anymore.”

Copeland liked Jibril. The man was obsessed; he was shortsighted. Yet his plans and schemes usually contained a nugget of glory, and it was Copeland’s job to dig it out. Working with Jibril Azi was seldom boring.

“If, as you suggest, we *are* behind this, then why are you bringing it to me?”

“So you can stop them. Stop us.”

“You really think I have that kind of pull?”

The younger man hesitated. “Then send me in.”

“Into Libya? No way. No war zones for you.”

Jibril was rash, but he wasn’t stupid. “You’re right, Jake. I don’t have anything here. Nothing solid. But there’s *something*. You agree?”

“Certainly there’s something. I’m not saying there isn’t. But if—”

“So I need to look into it.”

Copeland chewed his lower lip, shifting to relieve his back of a sudden shooting pain. “Go on.”

“I’ll need authorization to travel.”

“You’re not flying into Tripoli.”

“Budapest.”

“Budapest?”

Jibril nodded. “Just an interview. A quick talk, and then I’ll tell you one way or the other.”

“Can I ask who you’re interviewing?”

“Our deputy consul, Emmett Kohl.”

“I’m afraid to ask how he connects to this.”

“Don’t you trust me, Jake?”

Copeland trusted Jibril, but he also knew when his employees were trying to manipulate him. So he listened with a wary ear as Jibril stepped back into time, bringing them back to Stumbler and the route it had taken through embassies and government offices before being returned to them, rejected. Jibril was stretching to find connections, but he was doing it for Copeland’s benefit, to make his acquiescence more bureaucratically defensible. It was, as Jibril put it more than once, just another research trip. Jake approved those on a daily basis. Finally, Copeland said, “Okay. I’ll write out an authorization and ask Travel for a ticket.”

“I’d rather take care of that myself.”

“Don’t trust Travel?”

Jibril scratched at the side of his nose. “Travel will put it in my file. There’s no reason for that, not at this point. I’d like a week off. Maybe more, depending on what I find.”

“You’re paying for this out of your own pocket?”

“I’ll save my receipts. Research can reimburse me later.”

“If you’re lucky,” Copeland said as it occurred to him that this wasn’t merely a way to keep his tr

secret; it was yet another way to make his deal entirely acceptable. If Jibril caused trouble, he was just a wayward employee on vacation. Copeland remained blameless.

So he agreed to the time off, beginning in two days, and wrote out a memo to this effect for Jibril to pass on to his secretary. "Thank you, sir," Jibril said, and Copeland wondered when he'd last heard "sir" from this man's lips. Ever?

He saw Jibril again that afternoon, the young man's coat folded over a forearm as he headed out to the parking lot. They nodded at each other, just a nod, but he could see that Jibril was walking on air. He was on the move again. Not all researchers felt this way, but Jibril had once known the dirt and grime of fieldwork; unlike many of his colleagues, he'd cut his teeth by seducing foreign nationals into betraying their own countries. Once you've learned how to do that to people, you develop a taste for deception, and drab office walls, carpeted cubicle dividers, and pulsing computer monitors feel like a poor substitute for living. So does honesty.

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PART I

A DISLOYAL WIFE

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Sophie



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# 1

Twenty years ago, before their trips became political, Sophie and Emmett honeymooned in Eastern Europe. Their parents questioned this choice, but Harvard had taught them to care about what happened on the other side of the planet, and from the TV rooms in their dorms they'd watched the crumbling of the USSR with the kind of excitement that hadn't really been their due. They had watched with the erroneous feeling that they, along with Ronald Reagan, had chipped away at the foundations of the corrupt Soviet monolith. By the time they married in 1991, both only twenty-two, they felt like time for a victory lap.

Unlike Emmett, Sophie had never been to Europe, and she'd longed to see those Left Bank Parisian cafés she'd read so much about. "But *this* is where history's happening," Emmett told her. "It's the less traveled road." From early on in their relationship, Sophie had learned that life was more interesting when she took on Emmett's enthusiasms, so she didn't bother resisting.

They waited until September to avoid the August tourist crush, gingerly beginning their trip with four days in Vienna, that arid city of wedding-cake buildings and museums. Cool but polite Austrians filled the streets, heading down broad avenues and cobblestone walkways, all preoccupied by things more important than gawking American tourists. Dutifully, Sophie lugged her *Lonely Planet* as they visited the Stephansdom and Hofburg, the Kunsthalle, and the cafés Central and Sacher, Emmett talking of Graham Greene and the filming of *The Third Man*, which he'd apparently researched just before their trip. "Can you imagine how this place looked just after the war?" he asked at the Sacher on their final Viennese afternoon. He was clutching a foot-tall beer, gazing out the café window. "They were decimated. Living like rats. Disease and starvation."

As she looked out at shining BMWs and Mercedeses crawling past the imposing rear of the State Opera House, she couldn't imagine this at all, and she wondered—not for the first time—if she was lacking in the kind of imagination that her husband took for granted. Enthusiasm and imagination. She measured him with a long look. Boyish face and round, hazel eyes. A lock of hair splashed across his forehead. *Beautiful*, she thought as she fingered her still unfamiliar wedding band. This was the man she was going to spend the rest of her life with.

He turned from the window, shaking his head, then caught sight of her face. "Hey. What's wrong?"

She wiped away tears, smiling, then gripped his fingers so tightly that her wedding ring pinched the soft skin of her finger. She pulled him closer and whispered, "Let's go back to the room."

He paid the bill, fumbling with Austrian schillings, *Enthusiasm, imagination, and commitment*—these were the qualities she most loved in Emmett Kohl, because they were the very things she felt she lacked. Harvard had taught her to question everything, and she had taken up that challenge, growing up aptly disillusioned by both left and right, so uncommitted to either that when Emmett began his

minilectures on history or foreign relations, she just sat and listened, less in awe of his facts than in awe of his belief. It struck her that this was what adulthood was about—belief. What did Sophie believe in? She wasn't sure. Compared to him, she was only half an adult. With him, she hoped, she might grow into something better.

While among historical artifacts and exotic languages she always felt inferior to her new husband, in bed their roles were reversed, so whenever the insecurity overcame her she would draw him there. Emmett, delighted to be used this way, never thought to wonder at the timing of her sexual urges. He was beautiful and smart but woefully inexperienced, whereas she had learned the etiquette of the sheets from a drummer in a punk band, a French history teacher's assistant, and, over the space of a single experimental weekend, a girlfriend from Virginia who had come to visit her in Boston.

So when they returned to their hotel room, hand in hand, and she helped him out of his clothes and let him watch, fingertips rattling against the bedspread, as she stripped, she felt whole again. She was the girl who believed in nothing, giving a little show for the boy who believed in everything. Yet by the time they were tangled together beneath the sheets, flesh against flesh, she realized that she was wrong. She did believe in something. She believed in Emmett Kohl.

The next morning they boarded the train to Prague, and not even the filthy car with the broken, stinking toilet deterred her. Instead, it filled her with the illusion that they were engaged in *real* travel, cutting-edge travel. "This is what the rest of the world looks like," Emmett said with a smile as he surveyed the morose, nervous Czechs clutching bags stuffed with contraband cigarettes, alcohol, and other luxuries marked for resale back home. When, at the border, the guards removed an old woman and two young men who quietly watched the train leave them behind, Sophie was filled with feelings of authenticity.

She told herself to keep her eyes and ears open. She told herself to absorb it all.

The dilapidated fairy-tale architecture of Prague buoyed them, and they drank fifty-cent beers in underground taverns lit with candles. Sophie tried to put words to her excitement, the magnitude of a small-town girl ending up here, of all places. She was the child of a Virginia lumber merchant, her travels limited to the height and breadth of the East Coast, and now she was an educated woman married, wandering the Eastern Bloc. This dislocation stunned her when she thought about it, yet when she tried to explain it to her husband her words felt inadequate. Emmett had always been the verbal one, and when he smiled and held her hand and told her he understood she wondered if he was patronizing her. "Stick with me, kid," he said in his best Bogart.

On their third day, he bought her a miniature bust of Lenin, and they laughed about it as they walked the crowded Charles Bridge between statues of Czech kings looking down on them in the stagnant summer heat. They were a little drunk, giggling about the Lenin in her hand. She rocked back and forth and used it the way a ventriloquist would. Emmett's face got very pink under the sun—years later, she would remember that.

Then there was the boy.

He appeared out of nowhere, seven or eight years old, emerging from between all the other anonymous tourists, silent at Sophie's elbow. Suddenly, he had her Lenin in his hands. He was so quick. He bolted around legs and past an artist dabbing at an easel to the edge of the bridge, and

Sophie feared he was going to leap over. Emmett started moving toward the boy, and then they saw the bust again, over the boy's head. He hurtled it into the air—it rose and fell.

“Little *shit*,” Emmett muttered, and when Sophie caught up to him and looked down at the river there was no sign of her little Lenin. The boy was gone. Afterward, on the walk back to the hotel, she was overcome by the feeling that she and Emmett were being made fools of. It followed her the rest of the trip, on to Budapest and during their unexpected excursion to Yugoslavia, and even after they returned to Boston. Twenty years later, she still hadn't been able to shake that feeling.

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## 2

Her first thought upon arriving at Chez Daniel on the evening of March 2, 2011, was that her husband was looking very good. She didn't have this thought often, but it was less an insult to Emmett than an indictment against herself, and the ways in which twenty years of marriage can blind you to your partner's virtues. She suspected that he saw her the same way, but she hoped he at least had moments like this, where warmth and pleasure filled her at the sight of his eternally youthful face and she thought that, *Yes, this one's mine*. It didn't matter how brief they were, or how they might be followed by something terrible—those bursts of attraction could sustain her for months.

Chez Daniel, like most decent French restaurants—even French restaurants in Hungary—was cramped, casual, and a bit frantic. Simple tablecloths, excellent food. She joined him at a table by the beige wall beneath framed sepia scenes of the dirty and cracked Budapest streets that made for hard walking but wonderfully moody pictures. As they waited for the wine, Emmett straightened the utensils on either side of his plate and asked how her day had been.

“Glenda,” she said. “Four hours with Glenda at the Gellért Baths. Steam, massages, and too many Cosmopolitans. What do you think?”

He'd heard often enough about the Wednesday routine she'd been roped into by the wife of his boss, Consul General Raymond Bennett. Always the Gellért Hotel, where Sophie and Emmett had spent part of their honeymoon, back when even students could afford its Habsburg elegance. Emmett said, “Anything exciting in her life?”

“Problems with Hungarians, naturally.”

“Naturally.”

“I tell her to ask Ray to put in for a transfer, but she pretends it's beyond her means.”

“How about you?” he asked.

“Am I anti-Hungarian, too?”

“How are you doing here?”

Sophie leaned closer, as if she hadn't heard. It wasn't a question she posed to herself often, so she had to take a moment. They'd lived for six months in Budapest, where Emmett was a deputy consul. Last year, their home had been Cairo—Hosni Mubarak's Cairo. Two years before that, it had been Paris. In some ways, the cities blended in her memory—each was a blur of social functions and brief friendships and obscure rituals to be learned and then forgotten, each accompanied by its own menagerie of problems. Paris had been fun, but Cairo had not.

In Cairo, Emmett had been irritable and on edge—a backfiring car would make him stumble—and he would return from the office itching for a fight. Sophie—maybe in reaction, maybe not—had built a new life for herself, constructed of lies.

The good news was that Cairo had turned out to be a phase, for once they arrived in Hungary the air cleared. Emmett reverted to the man she had decided to spend her life with twenty years ago, and she let go of the puerile intoxication of deceit, her secrets still safely kept. In Budapest, they were adults again.

Emmett was waiting for an answer. She shrugged. “How can I not be happy? A lady of leisure. I’m living the dream.”

He nodded, as if it were the answer he’d expected—as if he’d known she would lie. Because the irony was that, of the three cities they had called home, Cairo was the only one she would have returned to in a second, if given the chance. There, she had found something liberating in the street noise and traffic jams and odors. She had learned how to move with a little more grace, to find joy in decorating the apartment with star clusters and flowers of the blue Egyptian water lily; she took delight in the particular melody of Arabic, the predictability of daily prayers, and the investigation of strange, new foods. She also discovered an unexpected pleasure in the act of betrayal itself.

But was it really a lie? Was she unhappy in Budapest?

No. She was forty-two years old, which was old enough to know good fortune when it looked her in the eye. With the help of L’Oréal, she’d held on to her looks, and a bout of high blood pressure a few years ago had been tempered by a remarkable French diet. They were not poor; they traveled extensively. While there were moments when she regretted the path her life had taken—at Harvard she had aspired to academia or policy planning, and one winter day in Paris a French doctor had explained after her second miscarriage that children would not be part of her future—she always stepped back to scold herself. She might be sometimes bored, but adulthood, when well maintained, was supposed to be dull. Regretting a life of leisure was childishness.

Yet at nights she still lay awake in the gloom of their bedroom, wondering if anyone would notice if she hopped a plane back to Egypt and just disappeared, before remembering that her Cairo, the one she loved, no longer existed.

She and Emmett had been in Hungary five months when, in January, Egyptian activists had called for protests against poverty, unemployment, and corruption, and by the end of the month, on January 25, they’d had a “day of rage” that grew until the whole city had become one enormous demonstration with its epicenter in Tahrir Square, where Sophie would once go to drink tea.

On February 11, less than a month before their dinner at Chez Daniel, Hosni Mubarak had stepped down after thirty years in power. He wasn’t alone. A month before that, Tunisia’s autocrat had fled, and as Sophie and Emmett waited for their wine a full-scale civil war was spreading through Libya westward from Benghazi toward Tripoli. The pundits were calling it the Arab Spring. She had health, wealth, and a measure of beauty, as well as interesting times to live in.

“Any fresh news from Libya?” she asked.

He leaned back, hands opening, for this was their perpetual subject. Emmett had spent an enormous amount of time watching CNN and shouting at the screen for the Libyan revolutionaries to advance on Tripoli, as if he were watching a football game, as if he were a much younger man who hadn’t already witnessed civil war. “Well, we’re expecting word soon from the Libyan Transitional Council—they’ll be declaring themselves Libya’s official representative. We’ve had a few days of EU sanctions against

Gadhafi, but it'll be a while before they have any effect. The rebels are doing well—they're holding onto Zawiyah, just west of the capital." He shrugged. "The question is, when are we going to get our asses and drop a few bombs on Tripoli?"

"Soon," she said hopefully. He had brought her over to the opinion that with a few bombs Muammar Gadhafi and his legions would fold within days, and that there would be no need for foreign troops to step in and, as Emmett put it, *soil their revolution*. "Is that it?" she asked.

"All we've heard."

"I mean you. How was your day?"

The wine arrived, and the waiter poured a little into Emmett's glass for approval. Sophie ordered fresh tagliatelle with porcini mushrooms, while Emmett asked for a steak, well done. Once the waiter was gone, she said, "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Your day."

"Right," he said, as if he'd forgotten. "Not as exciting as yours. Work-wise, at least."

"And otherwise?"

"I got a call from Cairo."

It was a significant statement—at least, Emmett had meant it to be—but Sophie felt lost. "Someone we know?"

"Stan Bertolli."

She heard herself inhale through her nose and wondered if he had heard it, too. "How's Stan?"

"Not well, apparently."

"What's wrong?"

Emmett took his glass by the stem and regarded the wine carefully. "He tells me he's in love."

"Good for him."

"Apparently not. Apparently, the woman he's in love with is married."

"You're right," she said, forcing her voice to flatline. The air seemed to go out of the room. Was this really happening? She'd imagined it before, of course, but never in a French restaurant. She said, "That's not good."

He took a breath, sipped his wine, then set it on the table. The whole time, his eyes remained fixed on the deep red inside the glass. Finally, quietly, he said, "Were you ever going to tell me?"

This, too, was not how she'd imagined it. She floundered for an answer, and her first thought was to lie: *Of course I was*. Before transforming the thought into speech, though, she realized that she wouldn't have told him, not ever.

She considered going on the defensive and reminding him of how he had been in Cairo, how he had treated her as if she had been a perpetual obstacle. How he had pushed her away until, looking for something, anything, to complement her feelings of liberation she finally gave in to Stan's advances. Only partly true, but it might have been enough to satisfy him.

She said, "Of course I was going to tell you."

"When?"

"When I got up the courage. When enough time had passed."

“So we’re talking about years.”

“Probably.”

Chewing the inside of his cheek, Emmett looked past her at other tables, perhaps worried that they all knew he was a cuckold, and the corners of his eyes crinkled in thought.

What was there to think about? He’d had all day, but he still hadn’t decided, for this wasn’t only about an affair—it was about Emmett Kohl, and what kind of man he wanted to be. She knew him a little too well.

One kind of man would kick her out of his life, would rage and throw his glass at her. But that wasn’t him. He would have had his “little shit” moment as soon as he hung up the telephone; his dose of rage was over. He needed something that could show off his anger without forcing him to break character or descend into cliché—it was a tricky assignment.

She said, “It’s over. If that helps.”

“Not really.”

“Do you remember how you were in Cairo?”

His damp eyes were back on her, brow twitching. “You’re not going to twist this into my fault, are you?”

She looked down at her glass, which she still hadn’t touched. He knew very well how he had been in Cairo, but he wasn’t interested in drawing a connection between that and her infidelity. Were she his wife, she would have felt the same way.

He said, “Do you love him?”

“No.”

“Did you love him?”

“For a week I thought I might, but I was wrong.”

“Were you thinking about a divorce?”

She frowned, almost shocked by the use of a word that she had never considered. “God. No. Never. You’re...” She hesitated, then lowered her voice, pushing a hand across the table in his direction. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to me, Emmett.”

He didn’t even acknowledge her hand. “Then ... *why?*”

Anyone who’s committed adultery envisions this moment, plots it out and works up a rough draft of a speech that, she imagined, will cut through the fog with some ironclad defense of the indefensible. Sitting there, though, staring at his wounded face, she couldn’t remember any of it, and she found herself grasping for words. Yet all that came to her was hackneyed lines, as if she were reading from a script. But they were both doing that, weren’t they? “I was lonely, Emmett. Simple as that.”

“Who else knew?”

“What?”

“Who else knew about this?”

She pulled back her untouched hand. He was being petty now, as if it truly mattered whether or not someone knew of his bruised pride. But she could give him that. “No one,” she lied.

He nodded, but didn’t look relieved.

The food came, giving them time to regroup, and as she ate, cheeks hot and hand trembling, she

reflected on how betrayed he had to feel. Hadn't she known from the beginning that she would do this to him? Hadn't she seen all this coming? Not really, for in Cairo she'd gone with the moment. In Cairo she'd been stupid.

Daniel had done an excellent job with her tagliatelle, perfectly tender, and there was a pepper sauce on Emmett's steak that smelled divine. Emmett began to stab halfheartedly at his meat. The sight made her want to cry. She said, "What was it? In Cairo."

He looked up—no exasperation, just simple confusion.

"You were a mess there. Me, too, I know, but you ... well, you were impossible to live with. Paris was fine, and here. But in Cairo you were a different man."

"So you *are* trying to blame me," he said. Coldly.

"I just want to know what was on your back in Cairo."

"It doesn't matter," he said as he lifted a bite to his mouth. He delivered it. It was like a punctuation mark, that move.

"Cairo was bad from the start," she went on, forcing the words out. "Not for me. No—I loved it. But you changed there, and you never told me anything."

"So you fucked Stan."

"Yes, I fucked Stan. But that doesn't change the fact that you became someone else there, and once we left Cairo you returned to your old self."

He chewed, staring through her.

"I'm not trying to start a fight, Emmett. I *like* the man you are now. I love him. I didn't like the man you were there. So let's get it out in the open. What was going on in Cairo?"

As he took another bite, still staring, something occurred to her.

"Were *you* having an affair?"

He sighed, disappointed by her stupidity.

"Then what was it?"

He still watched so coldly, but she could see his barriers breaking down. It was in the rhythm of his chewing, the way it slowed.

"Come on, Emmett. You can't keep it a secret forever."

He swallowed, his wrist on the edge of the table, his fork holding a fresh triangle of beef a few inches above his plate. He said, "Remember Novi Sad?"

There it was. Yugoslavia, twenty years ago. *I saved you, Sophie. This is how you pay me back?* She nodded.

"Zora?" he asked.

"Zora Balašević," she said, her throat now dry.

"Zora was in Cairo."

She knew this, of course, but said, "Cairo?"

"Working at the Serbian embassy. BIA—one of their spies. Not long after we arrived, she got in my touch. Ran into me on the street." He paused, finally putting down his fork. "I was pleased to see her. You remember—despite everything, we got along well in the end. We went to a café, reminiscing about the good stuff, careful to avoid the rest, and then it came. She wanted me to give her



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