

# DOMINIC HOLLAND

# ONLY IN AMERICA



'Read this in one sitting and absolutely loved it. So funny and a wonderful story'.

**Graham Norton**

NEW EDITION

At 6.15, Milly's alarm radio obediently came to life.

'... that was the latest single from Ireland's first family, the Corrs ...'

She hit the snooze button. The only good thing about the morning so far was that she'd managed to miss the latest effort by the Corrs, another droning ballad no doubt, churned out by beautiful women singing inexplicably about not being loved. Reluctantly, she broke her heat chamber and poked a foot out from under the duvet and then snatched it back in again. It was bloody freezing. These days her radiators seemed to generate more noise than heat. She had a vague idea that some kind of bleeding was required, but of what and from where was a mystery to her.

Wrapped in a bath towel emblazoned with the words 'Shelton Tower, Park Lane', Milly hunted through her wardrobe for a blouse that was ironed, or at least one that she might be able to get away with. No such luck. She threw a blouse on the bed and retrieved her underwear from the top of the lukewarm radiator, putting it on as quickly as possible before rushing into her laundry room, or spare bedroom to give it its official title. The ironing board was permanently up, and she longed for the day when she didn't have an ailer draped in clothes at varying degrees of dampness. As reception manager of the Shelton Tower, Park Lane, it just wasn't acceptable to turn up with a sticking-up collar. The rogue lapel seemed to laugh at her iron's cotton setting, but eventually submitted after an extended burst of steam.

In her kitchen, she filled the kettle with just enough water for one cup and threw a tea bag into her favourite mug. It had been her first present from Elliot and was all she had left to show for a marriage that had ended so traumatically for her four years ago. She and Elliot had fallen hopelessly in love and hadn't noticed that they were completely incompatible: she was a confirmed romantic and he a serial philanderer.

Breakfast today was a dull affair. She ruined her tea with too much milk and, living alone, she always got bored as she neared the end of a box of cereal. This morning even her Special K Red Berries were proving hard work.

'...it's going to be a wet one, London. A one hundred per cent chance of rain by this afternoon ...' the effervescent disc jockey chirped.

Becoming increasingly irritated, Milly was searching for her umbrella. Her hall cupboard offered up piles of old newspapers and bags of cans and bottles waiting to be recycled, but no umbrella. 'Shit. Where the hell is it?' she moaned, carefully closing the door on the chaos once again. She checked her bedroom wardrobe for the second time. It still wasn't there, it hadn't materialised. 'Someone's nicked it,' she announced irrationally as she took a deep breath, as if that could possibly help. Suddenly, she remembered this afternoon's christening, and that she hadn't wrapped the blasted present. If a large golf umbrella was difficult to find, then what chance did she have with a roll of Sellotape?

After another five minutes of mostly repetitive searching, a thoroughly vanquished Milly sat at her desk. Wrapping paper festooned with snowmen and a roll of masking tape was the best she could do. And still no umbrella. With a hand massaging each temple, she sighed heavily. 'Milly, you have got to get more organised,' she told herself slowly, as if it were the start of a more measured and precise direction to her life. 'It's as simple as that. This weekend, Saturday, it's a dump run and organising this blinking flat.'

Her Tube journey from South Ealing into London was always painful. The Piccadilly line serves Heathrow airport, and so, as it crawls into the station, each train is already heavily laden with people spanning the globe, none of whom ever get off. No one flies three thousand miles to get off at South Ealing. She called it the

grope hour, and this morning she travelled into town forced up against a backpack from Oz, a suitcase from Rio and a crotch from Hounslow.

Just before eight o'clock, a well-groomed Milly chased up the steps of the Shelton Tower, Park Lane. The door opened for her courtesy of Samson, the hotel's oldest and longest-serving employee.

'Morning, Milly. You look as lovely as ever.' He smiled.

'Thank you, Samson. Looks like rain today.'

'Let's hope so.' He chuckled. 'Let it pour down. The more it tips, the more tips I get.'

Hotel doormen along with English cricketers playing Australia are possibly the only two professions that pray for rain.

The Shelton Tower hotel was truly a magnificent building. Built in the 1850s as London's most opulent office block, it had been converted into a hotel just after the First World War, and had accommodated the world's most privileged people ever since. As with most hotels, its reception area was its centrepiece. Huge marble staircases snaked down into its holding area amidst forests of mahogany, used to panel the walls, all hand carved and French polished. Light cascaded through an original stained-glass roof some one hundred feet above the marble mosaic floor. It was a hotel worthy of its five-star status and had no trouble attracting five-star guests.

Reception this morning was busy, but Milly could sense that something was awry. Luggage was accumulating at the concierge desk and a few esteemed guests (all the residents of the Shelton were esteemed) were looking flustered. Four clocks were positioned over the reception desk pointlessly displaying times around the world. On her last day at work, she planned to synchronise the times and change the signs to read London, Grimsby, Scunthorpe and Hull. The London clock said it was just after eight.

'Morning, Lucas.'

'Boy. Am I glad to see you.'

'Why, what's up?'

'Three bell-boys have bunked off. Mahmood's gone and done his nut.'

'Shit. But we're okay for this afternoon, right?'

'What do you mean?'

Milly tutted. 'Lucas. We talked about this. The christening.'

His smile gave him away, much to her relief. She and Lucas hadn't got off to a good start. First, she had been promoted to manager ahead of him, but worse still she had spurned his romantic advances. It was hardly surprising. At twenty-five, he was seven years younger than her and frankly out of his depth. Fortunately, though, he was an exponent of the no-harm-in-asking school of courtship, and they'd become good friends.

'So, you're having the whole afternoon off?'

'Yes,' Milly replied tentatively.

'The whole afternoon?'

'Yeah.'

'And I'm covering for you?'

'Like we discussed. Yes.'

'Okay, then. But you're gonna owe me,' he said mischievously, pursing his lips.

'A whole afternoon. That's gotta be worth at least . . .'

‘Lucas.’ She stopped him by raising her hand. ‘Please, let’s not go there, eh? Not yet anyway. It’s too early.’

His whimsical smile was suddenly replaced with his highly efficient professional receptionist look, which could only mean that Mr Mahmood was incoming. Mr Mahmood was the Shelton’s general manager, a fastidious Turk who quite simply lived for the hotel and the people it served. It was almost like a religion to him. His was a calling to serve rich people. At five feet one and a half, he felt the need to stand up so straight that in fact he leant backwards. His head was rigidly fixed forward with his arms stuck firmly to his sides, and he always moved at incredible speed. He walked so quickly his little legs were almost a blur, and with his rigid upper body he reminded Milly of a swan, but without the murky water to disguise his efforts. Reception to Mr Mahmood acted like a speed camera, slowing him down sufficiently for him to engage in a very prompt conversation with his reception manager.

‘Mill-ee. Everything is okay. Yess?’

Milly gave a regimental nod as he moved off, and fought her continual urge to salute, stamp her foot and scream, ‘Sir. Yes, sir.’ He had a habit of answering his own questions, and his determination to lose his Turkish accent meant that he tended to over-enunciate his words.

As the morning progressed, Mr Mahmood became more and more irate. He was furious that the bell-boys had thought so little of their job that they’d decided not to come in. He couldn’t conceive that they might have found better jobs elsewhere, because there was no better job than working at the Shelton Tower. Granted, it was highly suspicious that all three had been taken ill on the same day, but it wouldn’t have mattered if they had genuinely been at death’s door. They might have had rabies and he would still have expected them. Luggage being delivered by frothing Puerto Ricans was better than no luggage delivered at all. As ever, setting the standard, Mr Mahmood and his assistant had been trying to reduce the gathering luggage mountain that would soon block out the light. Since he had left on his last baggage run, the Buffalo Bills had arrived at the hotel. They were in London for a promotional game to prove once and for all that American football would never take off outside the United States. Forty-three gargantuan gentlemen, each with luggage the size of a family car that was now being piled high in the reception area. One vast and gruesome looking player wearing a headscarf took an instant and uncomfortable shine to Milly.

‘Hey, Rudy,’ he said to one of his team-mates, ‘I think Milly here looks even better than some of our cheerleaders.’

A few Buffalos looked over and snorted their agreement, marvelling at the brass neck of their colleague.

‘Can you high-kick, Milly?’

She smiled. Just about high enough to bring a tear to your eye, she thought. ‘Would you like to be a cheerleader?’ the ath-a-lete asked.

‘Do you really think I could make it?’ she gasped, as doe-eyed as a Disney heroine.

‘Hell, yes girl, sure you could.’ Despite his enormous height, her irony had passed straight over him. ‘I could even put in a word for you. If you know what I mean.’

‘Er, no thanks.’ She didn’t know much about American football, but she suspected that this player was probably a member of Offense.

‘Man, I really love it here. You know, they told me that little old Eng-land has some of the most beautiful women in the world. Oh, yeah. And I tell ya what. They ain’t bin lyin’.’

‘Thank you.’ She blushed, feeling ridiculous for saying it.

‘I like it here. I really do. Being somewhere where I don’t get mobbed all the time for signings and photos.’

‘Really? Well, in that case, I think you’re going to love it here,’ she said, comfortable that he wouldn’t get what she meant.

‘I’m sure I will.’ The Buffalo leant his considerable frame on the desk and bent in for a more intimate moment. He was probably scraping his right foot back and forth in readiness to charge. He held up his key-card.

‘Hell, I’m already having a great time. You know the number. You feel free to run yourself off a key card whenever you like.’

Milly didn’t know how to respond to this.

‘So, I guess I’ll be seeing you later, then.’

‘Yes, you will.’

A cheer from the herd; Touchdown! Good old Marvin. Scored before he’d even got to his room. A new Buffalos record!

‘When you check out.’ She added, and this time he finally got it. All 280 pounds of solid athletic steroid assisted muscle mass; winded by an eight-stone receptionist.

The service lift arrived. Its doors opened and two empty luggage trolleys appeared, pushed by a weary-looking, crimson-faced Mr Mahmood. The sight that greeted him was appalling. There was a queue at Reception and he could no longer even see the concierge desk, or even Hyde Park. Two of his five gold stars from the hotel sign were metaphorically lying on the exquisite marble floor. He shot Lucas a gruesome look. He hadn’t done anything wrong, but someone had to be shouted at. ‘Lucass. A worddd, pliss?’ he barked through clenched teeth as he scuttled into the back office beyond Reception, with the unfortunate Lucas trundling after him in his slip-stream. The demented manager was waiting impatiently as Lucas shut the door behind him.

‘Lucass. Pliss explen t’mee. What the fucking hell is going on in my hotel?’ His accent was always more acute when he was angry. Sadly, for Lucas, this wasn’t one of his rhetorical questions.

‘Well. The bell-boys are sick and . . .’

‘Yes, I know that,’ he screamed, shaking his head around as if he were being pestered by a wasp. ‘No.’ He bellowed. ‘Lucass. Lookk at me. Lookk at my face.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Do I look like an idiot?’ Lucas grimaced.

‘No, sir.’

‘I’m sweating like a fucking pigge. They’re not sickk. They are fucking skiving bastardes. But they will be sickk, if they ever show up at my hotel . . .’

He stopped mid-rant as the door opened, and Milly’s head appeared. (*‘The hotel reception is never to be left unmanned.’*)

‘There’ll be a queue past the Hilton shortly,’ was all she said. Without another word, the little moustachioed inferno swept past and ushered Milly out before him. He marched straight up to the next guest at the desk.

‘Mr Sakamoto.’ He did a reverent Japanese-style bow before the startled-looking guest. ‘Welcome back to the Shelton Tower, Park Lane. My humblest apologies for the delay.’

Welcome back? The man looked increasingly confused. ‘I am not Mr Sakamoto.’

There was an awkward silence as Mr Mahmood fumbled for an explanation. ‘You’re not?’ he asked. Perhaps the gentleman was jet-lagged and had forgotten his own name.

‘No,’ the man replied resolutely. He was quite sure that he wasn’t Mr Sakamoto.

‘I am so sorry.’ Mr Mahmood floundered for something more substantial to say. But all that came to mind was hideous. ‘Oh, well, easy mistake to make, eh? I mean, you little Japanese fellahs, you all look so alike.’

Milly speedily consulted her computer and saved Mr Mahmood’s blushes. ‘This is my mistake. This is Mr Konishi. I am sorry for the confusion. Mr Sakamoto has already checked in.’

The guest smiled at the simple explanation and a relieved looking Mr Mahmood congratulated himself on his decision to make Milly his reception manager.

‘Thank you, Mr Povey. I’m glad that you enjoyed your stay and we look forward to being able to serve you again,’ Milly said. Another business gladiator refreshed and ready to face his day filled with breaded crustaceans and chilled Chardonnay. Milly didn’t really notice what the guests actually did for a living. They were all president of this, chairman of that. Being a captain of industry didn’t really do it for her. Granted, their company might well have a zillion-dollar turnover, but that was usually dependent on something as mundane as Joe Schmo choosing to wipe his arse with their toilet paper. As far as the guests were concerned, it was only the celebrities who really caught Milly’s eye, but, as a seasoned hotel professional, she was increasingly difficult to impress. These days, the word ‘star’ is used far too casually, she thought, soap star being a case in point, a contradiction in terms, surely. Thankfully, though, the Shelton attracted more than its quota of A-list celebrities, and no matter how rude or aloof they were, they always lifted the staff’s morale. Mr Clint Eastwood was currently in residence, but anyone associated with Hollywood interested Milly. After her marriage collapsed, so did Milly – as did her career as a fashion buyer. Her mother called it a career break, but it was a nervous breakdown, and Milly couldn’t see that it was anything to be ashamed of. She took the job at the hotel as a temporary measure, and set about turning her lifelong hobby of creative writing into a professional career as a screenwriter, no less. Her first screenplay, *Artistic Licence*, had been a resounding success. It won a prestigious *Daily Telegraph* screenplay competition and secured Milly the services of ILM, London’s premier literary agency. Milly was flying. The script was then bought by Paramount Studios, although she never did actually receive any of the money before they lost interest altogether. However, she liked to think that the script was sold; it sounded so much better than saying it had been borrowed for a while. It was a wildly exciting time for her, but sadly since then things had slowed drastically. *Artistic Licence* was now dead, and it appeared that her agent, Lyal Roberts, wished she was too. He had had her latest screenplay, *Untitled*, for over four months now, and still she hadn’t heard from him. At great expense, which she could ill afford, Milly had attended two screenwriting courses, and the resounding message from them both was: *Do whatever it takes to get your script into the*



*decision-maker's hands.* The hotel had presented her with some wonderful opportunities. Spielberg, the Coen brothers, Coppola, Katzenberg, they'd all stayed at the Shelton, but sadly she hadn't managed to trouble any of them. A number of Hollywood luminaries were in Mr Eastwood's party, including Albert T. Willenheim, the infamous film mogul who currently headed up Pacific Studios. They didn't come any bigger than that, Milly thought. Ambitious young writers the world over would kill for access to Albert T. Willenheim, and yet Milly feared that he would be added to her growing list of missed opportunities. She had lots of reasons to explain her inaction, but none of them stood-up to much scrutiny. They ranged from: 'They won't read it anyway' to 'It's against hotel policy to solicit a guest with anything other than first-rate service'. This was of course nonsense. Theft was also strictly against hotel policy, and she hadn't bought linen or towels for years. The truth was that she was terrified of these people and petrified of being rejected, and had decided that she would do nothing proactive and instead believe passionately in fate. All those years at school learning about algebra and ox-bow lakes and not one lesson in self-esteem! And anyway, just what the hell would she say to someone like Albert T. Willenheim?

*'Mr Willenheim, welcome back to the Shelton Tower. How was your day today? I trust your meeting with Mr Caine was a success. He's one of our best actors. Ignore Jaws III it was just a blip. Now, let's see, you have many urgent messages, but never mind them for the moment. Here's my latest screenplay which I want you to read this afternoon 'cos I'm not in tomorrow . . .'*

It was now just after ten o'clock and Reception was finally quietening down after the morning rush. The luggage mountain was no longer snow-capped and an air of serenity had been restored, for the moment at least.

'Milly. That movie guy's in having breakfast,' Lucas said casually.

'Yeah. I know, I saw them all go in.'

'So, you gonna go for it or what?'

'Have you been speaking to Georgina?'

'No. Why?' he said defensively.

'Cos you sound just like her.'

Increasingly, most of her friends seemed keen that Milly should humiliate herself in front of a Hollywood executive, and chief among them was her best friend Georgina. She'd spent most of the previous evening explaining why Milly should just accept that her agent was a useless little shit and that she had to 'empower herself and become proactive'. Georgina was in PR. She'd pressed for a full movie pitch, which was rejected, but Milly did concede that she should at least introduce herself. As Georgina had said over and over *ad nauseam*, Milly had nothing to lose, apart from her dignity, of course.

'So. What about it?' Lucas asked again.

'Oh, I don't know.'

'Why not? You've got nothing to lose.'

Milly looked at him suspiciously.

'And you haven't spoken to Georgina?'

'No. I swear. I just think you should do something about it. That's all.'

'What? Just like that, eh?'

'I'm not saying how, that's your department. It's just that he's staying here and you have got a key to his room.'

Another Georgina line.

'You bloody have spoken to her.'

Lucas wasn't worried about being found out because something over Milly's shoulder distracted him.

'Shit, Milly. Over by the lifts. Don't look. Don't look.'

'What, what is it?'

'Clint Eastwood. Incoming.'

The film star hadn't been seen in the hotel since he'd arrived. Mr Eastwood wasn't so much a star, more a planet, and planets can visit hotels with no one knowing. They don't check themselves in, and they don't use any communal areas, preferring to hole up in their suites with their assistants and room service.

'Bloody hell,' Lucas muttered under his breath. 'He's coming over.'

The actor ambled over to the desk, and although Lucas was the first receptionist he came to, he continued walking until he stood face to face with Milly. Lucas was as gutted as Milly was flattered.

'Ma'am,' he said politely, as his piercing eyes held her gaze.

'Yes, sir. How can I help?' Milly smiled. She had a beautiful smile, which lit up her already animated face. It wasn't lost on the famous guest.

'I seem to have misplaced my key-card. Would you be able to get me another one?'

'No problem, Mr Eastwood. It would be my pleasure. Normally I'd need ID, but I don't think in this instance I'll bother. Somehow you look familiar to me.'

Mr Eastwood laughed and she was delighted.

'Maybe it's because I've stayed here before,' he said, continuing her theme.

'Yes. That must be it.' She handed him the key-card.

'Thank you very much, Milly.'

'You're welcome,' she fluttered as he nodded and took his leave. She wondered whether he ever got bored with making people's days. Normally she had to content herself with celebrities that she had just seen, but this was altogether different. With Mr Eastwood, she'd actually spoken to him, made him laugh and he had called her Milly. That saw him go straight in at number one in her anecdote charts.

'I'll have to report that to Mr Mahmood,' Lucas said indignantly.

'What?'

'What do you mean, what? Flirting with guests.'

'I didn't flirt with him.'

'Yeah, right.'

'Ah, so what.'

'So. If you can hit on Clint Eastwood, I don't see why you can't introduce yourself to that Willen . . . er, Will . . .'

'Will-en-heim,'

Milly helped him, although she wished she could help herself. From the safety of her own bedroom, she'd made Internet searches on all the members of the Eastwood party, apart from Mr Willenheim. The only one to register anything was Mitch Carmichael, head of development at Pacific. As such, he was the man she should be approaching. In fact he was very approachable indeed, something she instantly regretted telling Georgina. Mr Carmichael always looked distracted and stressed, something with which Milly could empathise and for which she liked him, but that didn't mean she was about to break her duck.

'*The opening of your screenplay is the only bit they're definitely going to read, so make sure it grabs their attention.*' Another of the great mantras from the screen writing courses she'd attended. On the Underground this morning, Milly had



wondered whether the opening of her screenplay really met this crucial criterion. It was funny alright, no doubt about that, but was it really an attention grabber? Would it compel the reader to read on? Possibly not, and so she concluded that perhaps it wasn't the best time to pitch it or herself to one of the biggest film producers in the world. How convenient for her!

'Speak of the devil.' Lucas gestured over to the breakfast lounge. Willenheim could be heard before he emerged, his mighty frame filling the entrance to the lounge, with his entourage in close attendance. He looked bloated, as if he'd just pulled his chair up to the breakfast buffet to save his legs. Indeed, he was still finishing his 'full English' while barking and spitting orders. His sheer size, his reputation, his job, whatever it was, he had an air of 'Don't fuck with me'. Not even Mr Mahmood had introduced himself to this particular guest, which was probably just as well.

'I don't give a rat's ass,' Willenheim boomed, and walked across the lobby towards the lift. He still had his breakfast serviette tucked into his shirt, and he ripped it off, casting it over his shoulder into the hands of an assistant as if it were a bouquet at a wedding. Abruptly, he turned and pointed his fat index finger at a female assistant.

'I don't care what time it is in LA. Get his lazy ass out of bed.' The assistant looked winded, as though she'd been hit by a water cannon, and other guests in the lobby shifted awkwardly. Willenheim glanced over at Reception and caught Milly's eye. He scowled. Georgina could stuff her ethos up her arse. There was no way in the world Milly was ever going to introduce herself to this guy. Willenheim and his entourage disappeared into the lift, but Mitch Carmichael was suddenly striding in her direction. Her back stiffened and she busied herself, trying to calm her nerves. 'Bollocks. Bollocks. Bollocks. This is it?'

The words 'THIS IS YOUR CHANCE' reverberated in her head, growing louder with each step he took.

'Hi,' he said casually.

'Can I help you, Mr Carmichael?'

He seemed startled that she should know his name. She hadn't checked him in and they'd not met, and Milly immediately worried about how she could explain it. It wouldn't be easy. *'It's nothing weird or anything. I just did an Internet search on you, that's all' or 'Last night, me and a mate were talking about how cute you were. I said that you reminded me of a young Harrison Ford and that you'd look great with a whip.'*

'Are there any messages for Mr Willenheim?' he asked.

She knew there weren't, but she began searching anyway to extend her window of opportunity sufficiently for her to possibly take the plunge.

'Are you enjoying your stay?' Milly asked, blandly.

'Erm, er, yes. Thank you,' he replied. He didn't seem to be in the mood for trite small talk. But Milly couldn't let this deter her. THIS BEING HER CHANCE TO POSSIBLY CHANGE HER LIFE.

'Business trip?'

'Er, yes.'

MILLY, COME ON. NEVER MIND SMALL TALK. HE'S A BUSY MAN. JUST GET TO THE POINT.

'Busy, is it?' she asked feebly. Desperate to keep the conversation alive and yet aware that she wasn't exactly dazzling him with her charm.

'Yeah, you know, a little fraught,' he replied, somewhat curtly now

'Oh?' Milly persevered but straining badly now.

He forced a smile. 'Yeah. Business is a little tough right now. Sometimes I wish I had a job with no responsibility.'

'I know how that feels,' Milly said.

'Oh, no. I wasn't meaning . . .'

'No, don't worry,' she reassured him. 'What business are you in?'

'Movies.' He sounded slightly embarrassed.

OKAY. THIS IS IT. HE SAID, MOVIES. SO, THIS IS MY MOMENT. TAKE IT. TAKE IT NOW.

'Wow. That must be exciting.' Milly whimpered.

WHAT? WHAT WAS THAT? I CAN'T BELIEVE I SAID THAT.

'Yeah, I guess.'

Milly's heart was pounding so hard now, she wondered whether he might notice it trying to burst out of her chest. Like the alien that did for John Hurt.

JUST TELL HIM THAT YOU'VE WRITTEN A FUCKING FILM, WILL YOU.

'Erm, I love films,' she added quietly.

'You do? Well, that's great. Okay . . . so, are there any messages?'

His question jolted her.

'Er, no. No, sorry. No messages.'

'Okay. I'm glad we finally got that straight. Nice talking with you.' He turned and left. Ineptitude on such a grand scale. What a woeful performance.

Typically, she instantly began trying to convince herself that the moment had been all wrong. The timing wasn't right. But it was futile. Right there! That had just been her golden opportunity, wheeled over on a splendid dessert trolley under one of those magnificent silver salvers, and had she taken it? Had she hell.

No thank you. Not for me. Just a black coffee, please. Georgina would go mad.