

## TWO TICKETS, THREE SUITCASES

*He's gone. Jason - you're in Rome. Can you come?*

What the hell am I supposed to do?

This is Rachel's third text, the white screen-light bursting again into my half-sleep as I sprawl uncomfortably on the sofa bed in Giovanni's crowded living room high above the Via Flaminia:

The first text doop-dooed an hour before: *Alan poorly, please chant*. Next one came forty minutes later: *Not looking good. Keep going*. Finally, this one: *He's gone. Jason - you're in Rome. Can you come?*

I'd been trying to sleep, willing it to be nothing but Rachel panicking. Poor Alan, he was lost from the first, anyone could see that, seventeen years ago when they stumbled into each others' lives - him on his third marriage (father figure, lost in love) and her, half his age and already divorced (trouble on legs). Now he's really gone, succumbing to his uneven heart-beat. Rachel's stuck with his body somewhere deep in the Calabrian mountains with only goats and the mafia for company.

Last week, bags packed for my trip to Rome, she'd summoned me for a farewell coffee so that she, constantly on the verge of leaving him, could tell me her latest drama. She'd finally decided to go and live with Dane (the builder) the same day Alan heaped on the agony by surprising her with the villa holiday he'd found online, which she obviously had to go through with (Italy anyone? Sunshine escape from dull old London town?) This holiday in Calabria was going to be a final try, the last strip of elastoplast on the seeping wounds of their years of low grade damage to each other.

So I open the window and sit in the ghostly light of the computer, hoping not to wake Giovanni and Charles down the corridor, and I'm pulling up train timetables and flight schedules while the city, eight floors below, slumbers fitfully. Even at three in the morning, horns toot and small cars reverse loudly into hard-won parking spaces. I go out onto the terrace and light a cigarette, pulling the collar of my robe up. The glow of the city's lights silhouettes the cypress trees that stand guard along the hilltop opposite the high rise buildings that surround me. Rome always feels like a well-cut cashmere coat to me, warming and flattering. Things have been going so well this time, I can afford to be kind. I'm not an actor any more, I write the damn plays. I can go to her. In the dark, stubbing out the cigarette on the waist-high wall that edges the penthouse terrace, I smile and shake my head and dial her number.

She's sobbing, gulping air and growling with grief. She checks herself when I ask that most stupid of questions, "Are you OK?"

"Yeah," she says, subsiding and sighing. "I think. No, Jason. I don't know."

"There's a plane leaves Rome at midday. I can be with you about tea time."

"Can you really come? It's so wonderful that you're here, in Italy. I can't believe it. I can't believe any of it."

"Where are you?"

"In the hospital. Nobody seemed to know what to do when they brought him here and it was just a fucking nightmare and now he's dead." She does sound OK.

I'm surprised. But then, so much of it is an act with Rachel. You can never really tell. It's more likely she'll sit in a park, trembling and weeping for the next three days and falling in love with a passing tramp, than do sensible things like organising death certificates and repatriating the body.

She has actually killed Alan, with her threats of leaving him. She has literally broken his heart. He loved her in that mute, panic-stricken way that older men take to tall, Pre-Raphaelite girls they've dreamed of (coming through the cornfields, long blonde hair, dressed in white) most of their adult lives. Madame Anima. That was Rachel for Alan. The feeling was not mutual. Rachel put up with him, with his devotion and his sudden waspishness, his lame puns and hopelessness with money, and the damp and musty, unaired taint that clung about him. He had a great flat in Soho and a string of useful contacts. That was the draw. I understood her. She was as shallow and self-obsessed as me. Plus, I liked the way I could usually get her to cut through the crap at some point. She could be genuinely funny when she stopped her futile attempts at acting. Obviously I had to go and help her.

So I push down my judgments into the corner of my carry-on suitcase, along with the shaving cream and the spare jumper, get myself onto the grubby Rome metro system and out to Fiumicino airport and board the plane to Lamezia Terme.

On the way from the airport, driving fast into the town, the long shadows of the cliffs shading the curving autostrada seem to move as swiftly as the taxi. It feels like time is being telescoped, rushing to get to the hospital, to the mortuary. Now the engine ticks as we sit there, me in the back peering around and not sure what to say or do, the driver only concerned that he should be paid and that I should get out. The lazy Sunday stillness of late Autumn afternoon. No bustle or business amongst the low concrete buildings that surround the tarmac of the deserted car park. Silence.

I wheel my suitcase down to the smaller building that stands apart from the others, and pass through the squeaky glass and metal doors into a grubby, green-tiled corridor. Dust settles on the low sills of the windows forming one wall of the corridor that stretch before me.

Rachel appears, haloed by her bronze-blond hair, tragic.

"Darling," I say, the way you do to actresses.

When we embrace, she seems to disintegrate. Her body has no substance. She reaches for my hands and hers, nails colourless, are clammy. I glance over her shoulder, through the smeared glass of the door and into a gloomy, institutional chamber where six low slabs face each other across a space, like beds in an abandoned ward. One slab is occupied, a white sheet covering the body up to the neck. I make myself look at Alan's delicate profile. His nose is sharper than I remember. The closed eyes and the suggestion of peace do not detract from the shock of seeing a chalk-grey face I think I know, life subtracted. I look away.

A young, dark-haired man with a tentative, untried air, sits on a chair by the slab and is chanting quietly to a small square object placed near Alan's feet.

Rachel, leaning down to sit on another chair, is wearing a loose-fitting blue cotton dress, and reminding me of a character from a bible illustration. She looks as if

she is about to draw water from a well, or receive a visitation from the Angel Gabriel. She places a gentle hand on the Buddhist's shoulder. He turns to her, smiling apologetically, and draws his praying hands apart, looking at her questioningly. The prayer beads dangle over his faded denim jeans.

“Thank you, *grazie*.”

Rachel puts her hands together and murmurs to herself while he scrapes his chair away and begins to fold up the little scroll and wrap it in a piece of velvet cloth. I look away from all that, too, irritated by the way she demands to be observed, demonstrating dignity while handling her sudden grief.

Alan, for some years, had relied on daily mystic incantation and the access it gave him, he said, to compassion. Over a sunny lunch in the garden weeks before, he explained that he refused to take the drugs prescribed for his heart condition. His faith was enough. Rachel, almost entirely talentless, had always been his proudest conversion, rescued from indecision and a non-starting career in cabaret, and moulded to the faith by his delicate hands. She did as she was told, and must have had friends amongst the community that Alan led her into, but I was generally the one she turned to as she mulled over the risks and advantages of leaving him, yet continued to stay. I was the one she dished the dirt with.

I sound harsh. Rachel is one of those people who get under your skin and remain there, exasperating. I had tried to shake her off, over the years, but she would get so upset, the way Alan got upset with her when she trailed off from time to time, to try and exist without him, that I sometimes felt we were executing a little dance, one of those courtly dances from the Renaissance, or a reel. Two steps forward, one back, circle around, arms raised, hands clasped and then back to back, a brief step with another, and before you know it, back again, face to face.

“Come on,” I say. “Let's get out of here.”

It isn't the right thing, but nothing would have been.

I drive the hire car, a plodding small-engined red Fiat, along the coast road to a bar on a cliff that overlooks the dark hump of the island of Stromboli. The intense, golden rays of the setting sun mould the contours of miniature palm trees, crazy paving and rustic chairs and tables; they look like symbols of something else, or ancient totems. Rachel's hair glistens and her fragile, pale features gain intensity. She plays with the glass of beer, turning it around and squinting at the flaring, amber-setting sun, out by Stromboli. Smiling, almost sardonically, to herself.

“We kept meaning to go there. Kept putting it off.” She stares at the island fiercely, then closes her eyes, weary.

She is annoyed they hadn't got to the island during this holiday; annoyed about the lack of purpose. It isn't that she regrets that Alan will never get there now.

Back at the apartment, which is high-ceilinged, recently built, painted light yellow and relentlessly functional, I am in the bathroom washing my face and considering a shave. Alan's presence remains in the form of his leather toilet bag sitting in the bidet. Only a few hours before he had reached into it, used the razor, found the shampoo. Impossible to match the thought of his hand, alive, touching those things, with the image of his sharp features, his body on the cold slab, and the simple, hard fact that he is dead now. I wipe my face with a small harsh towel, roughly. Rachel sits on one of the twin beds in the yellow light of the large, unadorned bedroom. Alan's dark green corduroy jacket, stained with what looks like milk on the breast pocket, is on a hanger hooked over the door of the wardrobe. Rachel sits, back straight, she doesn't lie down. She has nothing to say. She looks blank.

Eventually: "He was here yesterday morning. Here. And now... he's not." No tears, not yet. There is a kind of force-field around Rachel. It is not possible to broach it, to sit next to her, to comfort. Alan's presence is also here, in the bedroom, and it retains that brooding, unachieved quality that made it painful to spend time with him. He was much older than Rachel, but felt the inequalities and injustices of society as keenly as any teenage idealist. He still listened to Bob Dylan. He still sang along to Leonard Cohen, as he must have done when he was seducing his first wife; probably his second, too.

Certainly Rachel. Rachel had been his dream-girl, his child-bride, his reason for living and his inspiration. All those hackneyed things.

I regret having come. There is a terrible, harsh intimacy in being with Rachel now, an intimacy without tenderness. Death, source of so much sentimentality, is fierce in reality. I go and sit on the double bed in the other bedroom, remembering Rachel's tales about the way she and Alan had no sex life, her anger at not getting pregnant. "The two things are connected, you dozy cow," I'd said. "I mean, really."

She had laughed too, leaning back and opening her mouth, her generous breasts rearing up. As if I would notice them. But that day I did.

In the fridge there is a bottle of white wine, opened. Bracing myself not to think about who might have drunk the first couple of inches, I pour two glasses and go and sit on the terrace, searching for a view of the sea, black in the moonlight, through the tangled arms of fruit trees that crowd along the lawn in front of the villa. Rachel, showered and changed, has some colour in her cheeks. She's wearing a clinging black dress, the sort you can pull on easily. It shows her cleavage. "It's comfortable," she says, pouring herself so much more wine she has to lean in to sip the glass on the table.

By the last glass, the story is clearer. We have switched off the lights and we're there in the silence, in the dark, on the table between us a nightlight flickering in the night breeze. They had gone into the town to look for meat to cook for supper that night. Walking along the main street, Alan's heart began to pain him. He went into spasms and all his tablets were here in the apartment. So they went to a chemist's and he sent for an ambulance. Everything spiralled out of control within a few hours. As his breathing worsened, the young doctor had put him on another drug. That was when Alan had died. Rachel's expression tautens. "I should have done something."

“What though?”

“Well, you know. Asked more.”

“They were speaking Italian, weren’t they? I shouldn’t think it would have been easy, even in English.”

“No, but... you know. Something.” She looks at me, such a strange look. She wants absolution, but she wants to confess first. Her eyes are glinting. “Something. Oh I don’t know.”

I’m just about to say, “You wanted him out of the way, though, didn’t you?” when she leans over and grips my hand.

“Jason. Listen to me. Jason. You slept with him, didn’t you?”

I sit back abruptly and the chair squeaks.

Eventually, “Does it make a difference?” I realise that was the wrong answer; a bit too sphynx-like. Her face twists.

“That show he did with you. He was different after that.”

“Would it bother you if I had?”

“He’s dead. I can’t believe it.”

“Rachel, it was never like that. For me. With him. I mean...”

She’s hunched over her empty glass and she looks up, naughty.

“He wasn’t attractive enough, was he?”

I sigh. “Well... if you put it like that.”

“One has standards.” Her laugh is operatic, pitched for Musetta. “God, I know what you mean.”

“Rachel, this is no time for bitchiness. I mean... We have things to arrange.”

She sits back. She wants to be taken. She wants sex. She annoys me to hell. I want to ask her where Dane is now. Where is she with all that? What did she expect, with her meanderings, with her using of Alan. Where did she expect it to end up? Happy ever after?

“I should go to bed now. We both need some sleep.”

Tears are streaming from her eyes. “I’m such a shit,” she whimpers. “I’ve lost everything. He was everything. Just everything. What have I done?”

I go inside. “Don’t go!” she cries. “There’s another bottle in the fridge.”

“I know.” I come back with the corkscrew and the green bottle misting already in the warm air. “Come on. Drink is the only way forward in this kind of situation. Let’s have lots.”

I light her a cigarette, and one for me too.

“You think I killed him, don’t you.” Her voice is hard. I haven’t heard that edge before, and I like it. She’s not acting now.”

I nod. “Actually, yes. People can only take so much, you know.”

She drinks the wine like it’s milk and she’s ten years old, still hunched over the table. Her breasts do that little kink at the top that happens when they get older, when the weight is pulling them down. She says, “Like you’d care if someone did that to you?”

I let that one settle. “I do have feelings you know, dear. Why do you think I’m here?”

“I don’t know,” she says, and her tone is harsh. “Actually. Why are you here?”

I stand up. "Because you're hopeless. You're a mess."

She nods miserably. "I am. I've been terrible. Dave's gone back to his wife, girlfriend person."

"Well, obviously. Dear God. See what I mean?"

And that's when she cries. And I hold her. And I feel... uncomfortable.

Next morning we are busy bees. The doctor, who is absurdly handsome, is remote, professional, and the women in the crowded, wood-panelled, non-functioning administration office are more interested in Rachel's shiny green handbag than the tragedy of her sudden loss. Is it Prada? I translate the astonishingly good-natured, brutal words of the blowsy admin officer: "She says you're young, you'll find another husband soon."

It takes hours to find someone willing to issue a death certificate and we spend more long hours on the telephone to insurance officials, unable to understand that Calabrians don't embalm bodies and that time is against us. Everything has become a process, Alan's life abandoned to bureaucracy. Rachel drifts along grubby corridors with me, sleep-walking. There is no alternative for me. I must travel back to London with her, and face the music with Giovanni and Charles and the British Council another day. My play will go on without me. That's fine. Real life is more important.

A day later, and we are queuing at the check-in with three bags, and all that is on our minds is how we can afford to pay for Alan's suitcase. The airline official, a tree trunk of a woman, used to herding bad-tempered travellers onto twelve flights a day, has no compunction.

"You must pay the 70 euros. Is very clear."

"But this woman has lost her husband. He died two days ago. Surely you must understand, you must have pity, compassion?"

She sets her mouth in a line, shrugs. "Everyone has suffered in this life. What is so special with this?"

I look at at the three suitcases on the sloping conveyor belt. We have our two boarding tickets, and we have our three suitcases. Me, Rachel and Alan, in transit, still.