

## The primary suitcase

Elizabeth and Caroline Shove

Laura

Al and I kissed goodbye at the check-in desk. We'd only been seeing each other for six months but he was already talking about marriage. It such a shame he had to change his plans at the last minute, but never mind, he'll come to Detroit after Christmas, he'll finally get to meet my parents and then we'll be together again.

We watched the big brown suitcase disappear down the conveyor belt, and that was it, I was on my way. I changed planes at Heathrow and settled in for the long transatlantic flight. I laid out the gin and tonic and the tiny packet of pretzels and reached for my book. Actually was Al's book. I took it off the shelf just as I was leaving. To my surprise something dropped out. It was a note from someone called Maria, with a phone number and some kisses. What could that be about? Who was Maria? I thought back more carefully. What if Al had another girlfriend? Someone from his own culture? Was that why he wasn't with me now? Had I been duped and betrayed by the one person that I really trusted?

I put the slip of paper back into the book. I'd ask him later. The air hostesses were buzzing around in the front of the cabin, getting ready to hand out menus for dinner. My phone was on silent but I felt it vibrate. A text. It was from Al. 'Please forgive me. We have to part'. I stared at the phone in disbelief. I was right, there was someone else!

Seconds later, the lights went out and there was an enormous rush of air.

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Al

The traffic was terrible, and it took over two hours to get home once I'd seen Laura off at the airport. I looked around the sparse room. I was sure of it now: I wasn't going to join Laura in America. In fact, I wasn't going to see her again. My mind was made up. Maria was the one for me. We had grown up together in Libya and when she moved to Frankfurt we started seeing each other again, secretly. I was guarded about my relationship with Laura, but Maria knew I was planning to go to the USA – in fact the suitcase was already in the hall when she called by last week. What Maria didn't know was that I'd had a change of heart. Deep inside, I knew Maria loved me from all those years ago, and I knew that feeling was mutual. It was Maria I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, not Laura. Now that Laura was out of the way I could pay Maria a surprise visit as soon as she got back from her week-end break.

I settled down on the old green sofa and turned on the TV. I knew Laura and I were finished, but even so, the evening news was shocking. BA303, Laura's flight, had crashed. There were no survivors. The news reader said there were all the hallmarks of yet another terrorist attack. I was overcome. Laura, poor Laura, and her parents! It is true I wanted to part, but I didn't want her dead.

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Maria

A few days after 'the incident' I returned home. I double checked the private security system I'd set up. No one had been. Later that afternoon I heard a knock on the door. I turned on the secret

camera. To my amazement it was Al. I couldn't believe it. I'd been so careful when I planted the bomb in his suitcase. I'd used my encrypted app to follow its progress through the airports and into the skies, and when the time came, I pressed the detonate button. Hundreds of Americans were killed in one blast, and Al should have died with them. He was so gullible. I could swear he thought I was in love with him, but of course that was all part of the plot. I cared nothing for Al. My controller agreed. Al was expendable.

But Al was not dead. He was right outside, smiling broadly and with a huge bunch of flowers. I opened the door cautiously. I had to act natural, no hasty reactions: that's what it said in the manual.

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Mark

I double checked the baggage log. It looked like there were at least three pieces of unaccompanied luggage on Flight BA303. I shook my head, what were those airport guys doing? Security was supposed to be tighter than usual after recent events, but from what I could tell, the bomb was not in any of these stray bags. The fragments that had been found at the scene suggested that the wafer-thin device and its remote controller had been hidden behind the lining of a brown Samsonite suitcase. I had the passenger list and contact details. Thanks to our new surveillance system I also had details of all communication to and from the flight. I went over to the coffee machine and selected 'Extra strong, one sugar, no milk'. Tracking down the late owner of this one piece of luggage was going to be a long, drawn-out process. Back at my desk I looked through text messages. One caught my attention.

'Please forgive me. We have to part' – from the time stamp it was received only seconds before the disaster. On impulse, I called the number.

A woman spoke. No, she didn't know anyone called Laura Pearce from Detroit. There must be some mistake, but yes, this was Al's phone. He'd just popped out to the market to get some fresh fish and he'd left his mobile on the kitchen table. Yes, she was his girlfriend, yes, he was staying with her, and yes, sure, she'd ask him to call back.

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Maria and Al

Over dinner, Maria was as cool as a cucumber. She had a plan. 'Al', she said, 'when you were out, your phone rang and I answered it. It was someone called Mark asking about a text message. I said you would call him later. He said it was about Laura. Tell me, Al, who is Laura? Is she someone from your course? Have you got another girlfriend? Is that why you were going to America?'

Al stared into his steaming bowl of spicy fish stew. After a long pause he said 'It was nothing Maria, honestly, we were just friends – and in any case, it's over now.'

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Mark

When Al phoned back the next day my suspicions were immediately aroused. He gave his full name and address. He admitted that he knew Laura Pearce, that he was going to travel to Detroit with her, and that he had changed his mind at the last minute. The large brown Samsonite suitcase, yes, it was his – and yes, Laura had borrowed it for the trip. He said the text message he sent her was just

about their relationship. It was over. Of course, he was devastated about the disaster and her death. Who wouldn't be? He was so open about everything it was as if he wanted to be discovered. Sometimes that's how they are.

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AI

I finally worked it out. I had been duped, betrayed and abandoned by the one person I trusted. Maria had tricked me into love, she had hidden a bomb in my suitcase and now she had vanished without trace. I protested my innocence but to no avail, the evidence was stacked against me.

