



BAGGAGE

by Rick Marcou

Jillian picked up the black Tumi bag, a look of sheer satisfaction on her face. “This is the one. It’s perfect, I love it.”

“Seriously? It’s black. We talked about this. *Everyone* travels with a black bag. It’s impossible to find on the baggage-claim belt, someone else could grab it thinking it’s theirs. I tell you this all the time, get a different color, you’ll be much happier.”

Justin was getting frustrated; he’d been down this road with her before. Probably why they never bought one and were here now, a week before their big trip. He agreed to shop at Tumi, which was expensive but good quality. But he didn’t want to give in on the color. He stood there, both hands in the front pockets of his jeans. His domestic battle stance.

“This one makes me happy. Why don’t you understand that? Black bags are so much classier than those other ones. Who wants a teal bag, or pink, or whatever color people get?”

Jillian was getting more and more like this lately, wanting “classier” things. She had a “real” job now earning a decent paycheck, thought that it was time for “classy” things. Like her friends, all of whom made more money but in her opinion didn’t deserve to.

“I do. Well, maybe not teal or pink.

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He’s produced stories in several genres but says that mystery writing appeals to his puzzle-solving mind.

That predisposition even led him to become a constructor of crossword puzzles. This is his first professional fiction publication, and it’s a story that should give every traveler pause.†

Why not the blue one, or that cool gray-color one over there. It’s the same bag.”

“Not the same. And this is for me, so why do you even care?”

“Because when you’re waiting at baggage claim and you don’t find your bag, just know it’s because someone else grabbed it.”

Marta led Thiago up the stairs, her flashlight leading the way but her familiarity making it easy, even in the dark. She’d been cleaning this house for only a couple of months, been here maybe four times in total, but it was enough for her to do it blindfolded if she needed to.

They reached the bedroom, Thiago impatiently asking, “Where is it?”

"In the closet, there," and she led him straight back to the closet where the safe was hidden. It was shielded by the wife's hanging clothes, behind a panel, built into the wall.

Two weeks ago she was cleaning, had already finished the upstairs but came back up to grab the Soft Scrub she left in the hall bathroom. As she passed the bedroom door she peered in and saw the husband on his knees in the closet, with what appeared to be an open safe. She could see stacks of bills, and some shiny things she figured were jewelry. She didn't know what the husband did for a living, but from the house and cars she knew they had money. He didn't strike her as a typical businessman, like some of her past clients, taking a briefcase to work and wearing boring old-man suits. He wore lots of dark clothing and came and went randomly during the day. And one time she saw he was carrying a gun in his waistband. So who knows how he made that kind of money, he just seemed shady and dangerous.

The closet now appeared a little emptier than usual, some bare hangers; the wife must have packed heavy for their weekend trip. Marta moved the remaining clothing to the side, grabbed off the panel, and let Thiago do the rest. He was in his comfort zone, staring at a safe he knew well. He opened up his tool case and went to work, and within about seven minutes was inside.

"*Dios mio!*" he said when he saw what was in there. There were four stacks of cash each almost a foot high, and each had a hundred-dollar bill on top. He didn't have time to try to figure out how much was there, but it seemed like what a million dollars might look like. Behind the cash was a tray with jewelry on it, including a diamond necklace and several

pairs of earrings. Marta was momentarily frozen as she looked at the treasure. "Whoa, that's a lot more than I saw last time. Wasn't even half that."

"That's good, right? We take it all."

"*Sí, posiblemente* . . . But I don't know. I was thinking before maybe we take a little and maybe they don't notice, and you know, maybe we stay here. But with all this . . . Whoa, we could be rich for the rest of our lives with this kinda money." She stared at the piles, eyes still wide but her mind racing. "No, we gotta leave. Like leave the country."

"You sure? We could just move somewhere. Like to the East Coast."

"No, I think this guy could find us. I don't know, I just get the feeling he's, like, got connections, or something. Maybe just in the U.S., I don't know. Not in Costa Rica, though. They don't even know where I'm from. I never gave my real name, just my nickname."

"*Está bien* . . . if you want, we can go home."

"*Sí*. But let's get outta here. Throw it all in the bag." She hesitated a moment. "Wait, leave the jewelry. She's a nice lady, I don't want to take that from her."

"What are you doing?" Jillian asked, seemingly annoyed.

"I'm filling out your contact info on the baggage tag."

"I can do that, why are you bothering?"

"Because your handwriting sucks, we both know that. I'm just trying to be helpful."

"Yeah, real helpful, insulting me."

"Sorry. I apologize, that was rude of me. I just wanted to do something to help while you're finishing packing. Plus, I'm really happy about this tag, and that you agreed to it." He was

flipping the red tag up in the air and catching it.

"It was a good idea, I agree. Glad the guy at the store suggested it."

"I think he saw he might not get a sale otherwise."

"Yes, he would have." Jillian walked away, smiling after turning her back on him.

"Are you almost done packing? I want to go grab dinner."

"Almost. Let me just check the weather app again. It's gonna be sunny and warm most days, right?"

"Yeah, but remember we're going to the rainforest at least once. That's in the mountains, it'll be cold and wet. Costa Rica is kind of unpredictable."

When Thiago walked into the apartment, Marta came rushing into the front room from the bedroom. "You got it! *¡Excelente!* Let me see."

Thiago took the suitcase out of the bag, beaming with his purchase.

"What is Tumi?" she asked.

"The brand name. Best quality bag out there."

"Expensive?"

"Sí, but worth it. We need to make sure the bag is strong, and has good locks and stuff."

"That's good, I agree."

"I got black. I didn't want to stand out, you know. But the guy at the counter said to get a different-colored tag, easier to see on the baggage thing at the airport. I got red for Costa Rica."

"Ooh, I like that."

"Me too. Let's go pack it up, make sure everything fits. Anything we can't fit in we'll throw out, and just get new stuff there. We can afford it," he added. "We can start to live like rich people now."

"Not yet." Marta shook her head. "Not until we're safe at home."



Nicolás looked over at Mateo, who was diligently picking at his fingernails like he was putting the finishing touches on a painting. Nicolás wondered what was going through Mateo's mind. He always wondered what was going through Mateo's mind. He remembered when they were kids, playing on their *fútbol* team, and what Mateo did to one of his teammates. It was never proven, but Nicolás knew it was Mateo who did it. Mateo didn't like the teammate, Jorge, who happened to be the starting striker ahead of him, because he was a far better player. So Mateo sat on the bench. One game, Jorge was caught with an opponent's leather jacket in his soccer bag. None of these kids had any money, this was a poor neighborhood, but the visiting team was from a nicer area, closer to San José. Jorge was kicked off the team for stealing, despite screaming that he didn't do it. Mateo had a sly look on his face the whole time, though maybe only Nicolás noticed it. But he'd also noticed that at one point in the second half Mateo had run back to the bathrooms, and the visiting team's van was parked right there. The kid had said he left the jacket in the van. With Jorge gone, Mateo became the starting striker the rest of the season.

When Mateo said he needed a job, Nicolás vouched for him with his boss at San José Airport. The job was baggage handler, not exactly college-degree stuff; he figured it'd be fine. Nicolás warned Mateo not to pull anything, though; he didn't want to lose *his* job. He knew Mateo hadn't really changed after all these years, he still liked to mess with people. Not necessarily for his own good—he didn't steal, no matter how poor an upbringing he had, and he was dirt poor—he just couldn't help himself from screwing around.

When the first cart of bags from the plane that just landed made its way over to them, they started unloading the bags onto the conveyor belt. Mateo noticed the matching black bags with the red tags. He looked at the tags, his eyebrows rising up, and then over at Nicolás, who was busy hoisting bags.

Jillian and Justin made their way through the customs line, which luckily only took about ten minutes. Their plane wasn't that big, and by the look of the customs line there was only maybe one other flight that had also just landed. They then headed to baggage claim, excited to begin their adventure. They didn't travel much.

Marta was antsy. She couldn't help it. She felt like a fugitive on the run, which frankly wasn't far from the truth. But not from the cops, maybe from something worse. She did know two things, though. That the family wouldn't be home until tomorrow, and that even if the husband opened the safe as soon as they got home—she would if it were hers—they'd have no reason to suspect her until the next cleaning day, when she didn't show up. That was still eight days away. But she was still antsy.

She and Thiago got through customs in just a few minutes. Helps to be a "local." Then they fast-walked to baggage claim, doing their best not to draw too much attention to themselves but unable to just walk. They managed to arrive there before the bags started coming. San José time, she almost forgot. No hurries here.

By the time the bags started flowing, the conveyor belt was surrounded. She heard the guy next to her say to his partner, "See, look how many black bags. Told you."

"Yeah, but lots of other colors too,"

the woman replied. "We'll be fine. I hope."

Thiago leaned in and whispered in Marta's left ear, "We'll be fine too." He could see the worry on her face.

From the mouth of the baggage monster came a brand-new black Tumi bag, replete with a snazzy red tag. Justin uttered a "There you go" a little sarcastically. Thiago looked over at him, not sure what he was referring to. Being positioned just a couple steps to the right of where the mouth dropped the bags onto the conveyor belt, Thiago reached down to grab the bag. Just then, the next bag appeared over the hump, another brand-new black Tumi bag with a red tag. Justin exclaimed "*Whhhaattt!*" Thiago looked at him again, then to the left to see the other bag hit the belt. He looked down at the tag on the first bag, letting the second go by. Justin grabbed it, and immediately also looked at the tag.

Thiago said, "This ain't ours," lifting his head up from the bag to look at Justin.

Justin read the tag. "Marta?" he said, looking at Thiago.

"Yeah. You Jillian?"

"Yes, thanks." They traded bags, all smiles.

Justin turned to Jillian, "Wow, I thought the red tag would make it unique. What are the odds of that happening?"

Jillian looked a little bewildered. "Seriously. Maybe next time we get a weird-color tag. Or tie some ribbons or something."

Marta was breathing a big sigh of relief. She felt like someone was conspiring to keep her from getting that money. She just wanted to get out of the airport. Then she'd be in the clear, be set. Hopefully. But you never know. ●

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