

Baggage Claim

Synopsis: A rookie insurance con gets more than he bargains for when he accidentally collects the wrong luggage.

The flash of yellow lights and high-pitched beeping is followed by whining hum, which progresses rapidly to a metallic clatter as the baggage carousel springs to life.

About time.

I've been waiting, scoping out the area inside Terminal 2 for the past thirty minutes, but as the boss says, time spent in reconnaissance is never wasted.

I got here early enough to memorize the locations of the security cameras monitoring the baggage claim area, but not so early as to look conspicuous. It must look like I've come from the flight after all.

The first of the bags tumble down the chute and onto the metallic round-a-bout. I glance around the growing crowd of passengers waiting to claim their goods, eyeing up each piece as it passes before them like patrons at an oversized sushi train.

As the waiting throng gathered around the carousel grows, it surprises me more luggage isn't stolen at this point. Baggage carousels are always located on the non-secure side of the airport, and aside from the overhead security cameras, there's no supervision, and I've never seen anyone check passengers as they leave to ensure they actually own the luggage they're leaving with. Anyone could just walk in and take what they want.

Like me, for instance.

After a while, you develop an eye for what to look for. Expensive suitcases usually mean expensive contents, and on the odd occasion it doesn't, at least you get an expensive suitcase. Even if you're unlucky enough to get caught, you can always feign it was a mistake. The black suitcase problem - it's easy to say you picked up the wrong bag if it's a common size and color, and most are.

But not today.

The wins from playing suitcase roulette are too inconsistent. Today the boss has a better plan.

I scan the crowd. There's still no sign of the client or the bag. As with all jobs, in insurance fraud, timing is everything. If the case comes down early and circulates for too long without being picked up, it might draw the attention of security. Too late, and there'll be too few people around to make a mistake seem believable.

There's another loud clatter and a fresh pile of bags spills down the chute and begins to circulate. I spot the target. God, it's ugly. But unmistakable. A bright pink Louis Vuitton.

I survey the crowd again looking for the client. A man standing almost opposite me on the other side of the U-shaped snaking track is wearing dark glasses and the worst toupee I've ever seen. The boss said he'd be wearing a disguise, and bad as it is, this has to be him. He stares straight in my direction and briefly we make eye contact. I look away, but too late. You can't leave to chance that a review of the security camera footage could find anything suggesting we might be connected.

It's damage control now.

I see the bag approaching and scoop it up on its first run. Hopefully, it's been on the tracks long enough to be picked up by a camera. I struggle to heave it off the carousel and onto my waiting trolley.

What's in this thing? It weighs a ton. It's a nice touch, considering it's supposed to be empty. But the boss is like that, always thinking of the details.

With the bag safely collected I head briskly for the exit, pausing beneath one of the cameras long enough to make sure I've been seen, but without looking up, so they can't get any identifying details, like a shot of my face.

Behind me, there's a commotion. Someone yells something, but I don't look back. I slip outside into the rest of the arrivals crowd, before dropping into the backseat of a cab and heading back to the rented apartment in the city.

At the apartment, I wait a couple of hours before placing a call to the boss. Long enough for him to have confirmed the client has lodged an insurance claim for ten thousand dollars of lost jewelry which never arrived off his flight. Lost jewelry that never existed in the first place.

To my surprise, the boss answers on the first ring.

"Where the hell were you?" In the background, I can hear the TV.

"Whaddya mean where the hell was I? I was at the airport. I collected the bag just like we practiced."

"Our man said he never saw you...and his bag came through like nothing ever happened."

"Whaddya mean he never saw me? He was looking straight at me, and that disguise was terrible. Who has a toupee that bad?"

"Toupee?"

"Yeah...and nice touch with the weight of the case. I'd never have thought of that."

"What? I never put nothin' in the bag."

"Sure you didn't."

In the background, I can hear the TV getting louder. The boss's just cranked up the volume.

"What're you watching on TV, I can barely hear you over it?"

"The evening news. Mack? You got that bag with you?"

I look at the gaudy pink case sitting on the sofa next to me. "Yeah, why?"

"I think you'd better open it."

I flick both latches with my thumbs and lift the lid.

"What the...?"

Inside are two enormous bags of white powder. Nestled between them is the largest wad of cash I've seen in my life.

"Mack, you'd better switch on the TV."

“Why?”

“Just do it!”

I fumble for the remote and switch on the evening news. A reporter is talking. Behind her is a picture of a man wearing dark glasses and the worst toupee you’ve ever seen.

“Police today confirmed an undercover sting operation was thwarted when a suitcase belonging to Mafia boss Don Pasquale Bommarito, which had been targeted to be collected by the drug kingpin, was instead intercepted by an unknown member of the public...”

“Mack...? You know what this means don’t you?”

“Oh my God. We’re dead men.”