

Chapter 4 - The Interrogation - Part II

I'm positive that Mrs. Vargas has more than two thousand dollars worth of jewelry with her, Captain Richardson thought, repeatedly tapping his forefinger on the table as he studied the two ladies sitting in front of him. *But, how can I prove it without searching her suitcase? ... If only I could get her to confess.*

Tom then turned toward the weaker of his two foes. "Maria. You know I could make things a lot easier for both you and your mother if you would just show us the undeclared jewelry your mother brought. And, if you do cooperate, we would be willing to let the two of you off easy by only requiring you to turn over the jewelry and pay a small fine. How does that sound?"

Maria stopped and gazed at her mother's stoic facial expression, then directed her attention back to the officer in front of her. "I'm really sorry, Mr. Captain, sir. I really don't know what undeclared jewelry you keep referring to."

Victoria smiled as she watched the captain become even more upset than what he was before.

"Mrs. Vargas," Tom shouted, banging his fist on the table. "Haven't the two of you been listening to a single word I have said? We have a live recording of the conversation you and your daughter shared after you left Customs. And instead of having the two of you do prison time or face deportation, we're offering you an opportunity to redeem yourselves by paying a small fine and turning over the undeclared jewelry."

"I understand your offer," Victoria replied, brushing a loose hair off her forehead. "However, as things stand, I am 100% positive there isn't anything in your recording that would incriminate us."

"You don't think so? Then let's listen to what we have."

Victoria displayed a small frown as Tom picked up the phone.

"Mike. How about playing the recording of Mrs. Vargas' and her daughter's conversation, starting ... oh, let's say ... about a minute after they left Customs?... OK? ... Thanks."

In less than two seconds later, a crackling sound belched out of the speakers located in the Interrogation room's ceiling. Maria's voice followed, speaking in native castellano, .

"Mamá. ¿Estás todavía con todas las joyas extra que poner en la izquierda justo antes de Arica?" ("Mother. Are you still wearing all the extra jewelry you put on just before we left Arica?")

"Sí, lo estoy, querido. ¿Por qué?" (Yes I am, dear. Why?)

“BUENO. PUESTO QUE USTED DIJO QUE EL PUEBLO DE ADUANAS PODRÍAN SER SOSPECHOSAS DE NOSOTROS PORQUE ACCIDENTALMENTE MENCIONÓ QUE TÚ Y PAPÁ ERA DUEÑO DE UNA CADENA DE JOYERÍAS, PENSÉ QUE TAL VEZ USTED QUERRÍA DESHACERSE DE ELLA, YA QUE NO FUE DECLARADO..” (“WELL. SINCE YOU SAID THE CUSTOMS PEOPLE MIGHT BE SUSPICIOUS OF US BECAUSE I ACCIDENTALLY MENTIONED THAT YOU AND DAD OWNED A CHAIN OF JEWELRY STORES, I THOUGHT THAT MAYBE YOU WOULD WANT TO GET RID OF IT SINCE IT WASN'T DECLARED.”)

Tom then ordered his agents to stop the recording.

“That sure sounds pretty incriminating to me,” he said, now grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“Wouldn't you agree, Mrs. Vargas?”

Victoria almost burst out in laughter. “Not really, Captain. What you have played back is only a small part of the total conversation. ... I believe if you would continue listening, you would find the response to my daughter's statement quite interesting.”

“Sure. No problem,” Tom confidentially replied. “But I don't think it's going to help.”

Picking up the phone, the captain ordered the tape's playback to resume.

“No. Eso no va a ser necesario, chiquita. ... La razón por la que no declaré la joyería extra que yo llevo, María, es porque no era necesario. Estas pulseras no son el símbolo de intercalación puro oro de dieciocho pulseras que suelen vender. No son más que el oro símbolo de intercalación dieciocho plateado.” (“No. That's not going to be necessary, little one. ... The reason I didn't declare the extra jewelry I'm wearing, Maria, is because I didn't need to. These bracelets are not the pure eighteen caret gold ones we normally sell. They're only eighteen caret gold plated.”)

Upon hearing this revelation, Tom instantly became bugged-eyed and his mouth flew wide open. “Joe! Didn't you listen to the whole conversation before reporting your suspicions to me?”

“Yes sir, I did,” Joe replied, jerking backwards in his seat. “But I thought if we combined this recording with the video we got when they were with their relatives, we would have a rock solid case.”

“Video?” both Maria and Victoria said, turning to face each other. “What video?”

“The video from the security camera we have positioned inside the main terminal,” Joe replied.

Victoria unconsciously gulped. “And what exactly does this video show?”

“Now, that's a good question?” Tom replied, as the corner of his mouth slowly bent upward.

“Joe. Why don't we play it for them.”

A few seconds later, a projector screen lowered against the wall opposite of the large, smoked security window and the video began to play. On the screen, they were watching Maria and Victoria at the moment they initially greeted their relatives. However, after about a minute had passed, Mrs. Vargas, for no apparent reason, lowered her suitcase and unfastened its latch. She then appeared to be taking something off her wrist and dropping it deep inside.

"There," Joe shouted at the scene playing out in front of them. "At this specific moment, Ms. Vargas, were you or were you not removing some bracelets and dropping them into your suitcase?"

"Yes, I certainly was," Victoria admitted, while folding her arms in front herself. "I had gotten tired of wearing the cheap stuff. ... At home, I wouldn't even consider wearing anything gold plated."

"So that's why the bracelets weren't declared?" the captain stated, shaking his head. "Instead of being pure eighteen gold, they were only gold plated?"

"Of course. ... Like I told you early, Captain. Do you really think that after going through all the trouble and effort it took to acquire a U.S. Visitor's Visa ... I would throw it all away by doing something foolish?"

Captain Richard stared at Joe, then turned to face Victoria.

"If wearing gold plated jewelry was going to be so uncomfortable for you, Mrs. Vargas, then why didn't you pack it in your suitcase, instead of wearing it? That's what most people would have done."

Victoria chuckled. "Do you really need to ask, Captain? ... You of all people should know how famous the airlines are for losing your luggage."

"She does have a point, sir," Joe agreed.

Showing his frustration, the captain let out a low growl. It was obviously that his patience was now totally exhausted.

"I was hoping to avoid this, Ms. Vargas, but unfortunately, you have left me no choice. ... Would you please empty the contents of your suitcase onto the top of the table? Then leave it open so we could inspect it."

"Of course, Captain," Victoria replied, raising it to the top of the table and unfastening its latch. "I have nothing to hide."

Maria gasped, and then began to stare at her mother. "You must be kidding," the motions of

her mouth said, though the words were never verbalized.

Joe watched with anticipation as the attractive middle-aged, lady in front of him casually reached inside the suitcase and commenced to remove its contents.

"Is this what you were looking for?" Victoria asked moments later, after laying a dozen gold-colored bracelets across the top of the table."

Tom looked at her and nodded.

"And you claim that every one of these are gold plated, and not pure gold?"

"That's correct," Maria interjected. "But if you don't believe me, if you'll kindly check the inscription located near each bracelet's latch - you will see each one of them clearly states that."

Captain Richardson took hold of one of the bracelets, then after reading its inscription, looked up at her and frowned. *There has to be more than this. ... It doesn't make any sense.*

"Would you mind, Mrs. Vargas, if I now inspected your case?" Joe asked, while reaching across the table.

"Be my guest."

While Joe carefully investigated ever nook and cranny the suitcase could have possibly had, the captain continued to inspect what appeared to be nothing more than a piece of cheaply manufactured, gold plated costume jewelry lying within his hand.

Victoria could tell that he wasn't very happy. Maria, on the other hand, appeared to be enjoying this little escapade.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Joe apologetically began a few minutes later. "There is nothing else here. I guess we were wrong about our suspicions."

Tom snorted. "Are you sure? ... They still could be hiding something in a secret compartment."

Joe shook his head, no. "No such luck, sir. I've already checked for a possible secret compartment and couldn't find one."

For a second, Tom looked like he was going to explode. "Well. If that's the case, I'm going to have to apologize to both of you ladies for this major inconvenience. ... After you repack your suitcase, Victoria, both you and your daughter are apparently free to go. ... Just tell Joe when you're ready to leave and he'll escort you back to the front of the airport. ... I can only hope that your relatives are still waiting."

Both Victoria and Maria smiled as they watched the Captain begin to head for the door.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Mother,” Maria asked, about a half hour later as she climbed into the back seat of her brother-in-law’s Ford Fusion. “Were the bracelets you brought from Arica really just gold-plated ones?”

Victoria gazed at her and grinned. “Of course not, Maria. Didn’t I clearly state while we were being interrogated that I have had lots of experience dealing with Customs. ... Those bracelets I brought were only labeled as being gold plated. ... We’ll change their inscriptions to what they really are, sometime later.”