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Left Holding the Bag: Woman Charged with Drug Trafficking After Companion Flees

Cestra Burgess claims innocence after being left with 11 kilograms of marijuana in a suitcase packed by her male companion, who vanished before she could even secure a taxi

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Aerial view of Henry E. Rohlsen Airport, where federal agents detained Cestra Burgess after finding 11 kilograms of marijuana in her luggage By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

ST. CROIX — A woman is facing federal drug trafficking charges after an airport luggage inspection uncovered pounds of marijuana wrapped up in her suitcase.

According to court documents, last Friday, Customs and Border Protection officials at the Henry E. Rohlsen airport were conducting x-ray inspections of checked luggage coming off a Spirit Airlines flight from Fort Lauderdale. Agents detected “anomalies” within one of the bags, which bore tags with the name Ceestra Burgess. A CBP drug-sniffing dog also alerted on the luggage, after which the bag was placed back on the baggage claim carousel while officers waited to see who would pick it up.

When Burgess lifted the bag off the carousel, she was escorted into the secondary screening area for a more thorough inspection. The luggage was opened, and agents found individual parcels wrapped in Christmas gift paper. The parcels were inside vacuum sealed bags. Once opened, they were found to contain a green leafy substance that tested positive for marijuana. In total, officers found 11.3 kilograms of the substance.

When questioned by Homeland Security Investigations special agents, Burgess said she did not know what was in the bags. She had traveled with a male companion, she said, with whom she was intimately but not romantically involved. They have known each other for about two years, Burgess told agents, and he frequently sends her money through a digital payments service. A few days ago, she traveled from Alabama to visit the man in Miami, Florida for his birthday. Her flight and accommodation was paid for by her lover, she told agents, and while in Miami, he suggested they both visit St. Croix.

He transferred money for her to book her flight, and Burgess told officers that he bought the bag and told her he would buy her clothes for the trip, and also pack the bags for them both. She said she didn’t question him, and claimed not to have looked inside the bag which was supposed to have contained her clothing.

When the flight landed, her male companion reportedly told her to get the bag from the carousel while he went to secure a taxi. When the bag arrived and she went to claim it, she was detained by CBP officers. Ms. Burgess attempted to show HSI agents the messages between her and her male companion, but his end of the conversation had been deleted. By the time officers went to look for the individual outside the airport, he was long gone.

Burgess told agents that she did not know where she was supposed to be staying on St. Croix, and also that she did not have a return flight booked.

She was ultimately arrested and charged with possession of marijuana with the intent to distribute, and conspiracy to possess marijuana with the intent to distribute.

The case came before U.S. Magistrate Emile Henderson III on Monday, who found probable cause to uphold the charges against Ms. Burgess. She was assessed bail in the sum of \$50,000, which was satisfied by an unsecured bond. Now released from detention ahead of trial, Ms. Burgess is restricted to the state of New Jersey, and must surrender her passport. She is subject to the usual restrictions against owning weapons and using alcohol or controlled substances.